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My Young Husband; or, A Confusion in the Family.

BY MYSELF.

CHAPTER I.

MY HUSBAND AND I.

"AUGUSTUS!"

My voice awakened the echoes in the spacious room in which I was seated, as I thus called for my husband—my young husband—who is, at once, the joy and the torment of my life.

I was slightly irritated. The truth is, I've been in a state of irritation for the past year, and it promises to become chronic, if matters do not mend.

Now, Augustus loves me—of that I feel quite sure; still, his actions do not suit me altogether.

I've heard some people—spiteful people, of course—hint at money when they

speak of Augustus and me; but, though the torturing reflection will steal into my heart now and then, that he did marry me for my money, I will not believe it—no, I cannot believe it!

I am thirty-five, rather stout—with a commanding figure, allow me to say—my face is called, by some, fine, but rather florid—but that's spite again—my hair is brown, my eyes dark, and my mouth and chin tell of the firmness and decision of my character.

Augustus is ten years my junior—just twenty-five.

Now, such disparity in age, especially when it is on the wrong side, might really be terrible in some cases; but I cannot think that of my own, for, I flatter myself, the years have not told so severely on me as they do on some.

Of course I can't trip about a room like these airy, fairy creatures with figures like bean-poles, nor would I wish to; for, since Augustus has married me, I must be his style.

Sensible man! to prefer queenliness and majesty, to the fluttering frivolity of a butterfly.

My husband is a perfect dandy; he is as fastidious as if he were a millionaire, and he indulges his tastes as if he were indeed a millionaire.

By-the-by, that reminds me; let me see—thirty and thirty is sixty, and twenty is eighty—



MY YOUNG HUSBAND.

eighty dollars in one week for subscriptions is a little too much, it seems to me!

Of course, Augustus is well known as my husband, and it is expected that they should request him to put his name down on their lists; but why don't they come to me?

I'll speak to Augustus about this at the first opportunity. Let them come to me in future; I'll manage them.

All this time I had been sitting, like a statue of patience, holding a skein of yarn upon my hands, and waiting for my husband.

He was to help me to wind it—he had proposed to do it, himself!

I had flushed with pleasure at the proposition, for it was one of the old attentions he had so often paid me in our courting days, and it seemed to prove that, though indifferent and neglectful at times he still loved me as well as ever.

Smiling and pleased, I had opened the skein, and fixed it upon my hands; then he disappointed me—as he always does—by starting up like a rocket, saying that he wished to go to his room to get a cigar.

"I'll be back in a minute, Martha," he had said, "and then we'll wind

the yarn; I'll smoke and you can talk, and we'll have a cosy time of it generally."

Did this augur a change? Was he about to make up for his delinquencies of the past year? Or, was it only a preface to a request for money? I regretted that that last thought had occurred to me, for it dispelled that hopeful view I had begun to take of affairs.

I arose, saying impatiently, as I flung the yarn down into the basket: "Why does he not come? I'm sure I've called loudly enough for him to hear. Augustus—Augustus!"

No reply.

My irritation was fast deepening into anger.

I tried a higher key, that strained my voice so that it cracked, and that made my face vie with a boiled lobster in color:

"Augustus—Augustus!"

Still no reply.

"He must be wonderfully interested in something," I exclaimed, wrathfully. "I suppose he has forgotten all about me, and here I've been sitting like a fool, holding that yarn, and waiting meekly for him. Well, if he won't come to me, I'll go to him."

And I walked from the room with a step as firm and resolute as if I were a captain at the head of an army.

I reached the room.



MYSELF.

Not a sound from within.

I knocked.
No answer.

"Well!" I exclaimed. "This begins to be mysterious! I'll see what it is that engrosses his attention like this."

I opened the door, cautiously, and I paused on the threshold, dismayed at the scene of confusion that greeted my vision.

The floor was littered with papers, pamphlets, old books, boots, shoes, a couple of hats, gloves, and so on; every chair was overturned, and the contents tossed into a hopeless state of disorder; and from the closet a trunk had been drawn out, and down into the depths my husband was plunged, so busily hunting for something that my presence was unheeded.

I stood in silent dismay for one moment. How could this chaos ever be reduced to anything like order?

Then I gave vent to my feelings in the one word—rather in the tone than in the word:

"Augustus!"

A startled exclamation came from the bottom of the trunk, and the next moment, my husband—his handsome face flushed, his wavy brown hair damp and matted on his forehead, his mustache sadly out of its usual irresistible curl, his breath coming quick and hard from his undue exertions—looked up at me.

"Did you call me?" he panted.

"Yes, I did. And now, I'd like to know what all this means?" I added, severely, as I picked my way over the littered floor. "I thought you were just going for a cigar."

"And that's all, Martha—that's all," he fairly gasped. "I've had a terrible time hunting for it, and I haven't found it yet. I'm looking for it now. I'm determined to find it, or die!"

And down he plunged into the trunk again.

"You needn't tell me, Augustus Ray, that you are looking for a cigar there," I said, loftily.

He looked up at me again, and panted:

"I assure you, my dear Martha, I am. It's a choice one—a very choice one, and I put it away carefully—in fact, so carefully that I cannot find it now. I have been saving it for just such a time as I was promising myself this morning—a *tele-a-tele* with you. But I give it up," he added, sighing. "I'll have to content myself with one of these," and he took a cigar from the stand on the center-table.

A note was lying there; he picked it up, twisted it leisurely, held it to the fire in the grate, and then applied it to his cigar; then he allowed it to fall to the floor.

I looked in dismay about the room.

"Never mind," he said, cheerily. "I'll fix it all up. Never mind, I say," he repeated, testily, as I stooped to pick up some of the scattered articles. "I'll fix it all up myself."

I looked at him keenly.

The excuse that he had been hunting for a cigar did not satisfy me; I didn't believe it, and I was determined to try to approach nearer to the truth than that.

"Now, Martha, what's the matter with you?" he asked, in a provokingly cool tone. "Don't let such a very slight disturbance as this ruffle your amiability. I wouldn't have you tire yourself by arranging these things, for the world! You are too careful about me altogether; you must remember I'm a man, and strong, and capable of helping myself. Now, if you would trouble yourself less about me, it would—"

"Suit you, I've no doubt," I interrupted.

"Of course, I appreciate your anxiety and your thoughtfulness," he went on, not at all put out by my interruption. "You don't like to have me out late at night for fear that I'll get hurt; you don't like me to go out alone for fear that I'll get lost. It's all very good and kind of you, I'm sure, still—"

"It's inconvenient, I suppose. For instance, you don't wish me to arrange this room, for fear that I'll discover something that you would like to keep from me."

"Why, Martha, what a ridiculous—you will allow me to say ridiculous—assertion! Discover something? what, in the name of all that's marvelous, what do you suspect I have secreted here?"

"That's what I wish to find out," I replied, grimly.

"My best love, you astonish me! Is it possible that suspicion is on the list of your—ahem! your virtues? Now, my dear little woman, can't you leave that trunk alone?"

"No, I can't, and what is more, I won't! If there is nothing here, it cannot make any difference to you whether I look it over or not. If there is something here," and I paused and gazed at him severely, "I'm going to find out what it is."

I stooped and looked into the trunk. Most of the contents had been strewn about the floor; there still remained some books, old papers, pamphlets, etc.

"You see, there's nothing there," said Augustus. "Come, go down to the sitting-room, and I'll join you in half a second."

If it had not been for the evident anxiety in his tone I might have been satisfied; but as it was, I was far from satisfied, and I began to search.

An exclamation of triumph escaped me as I came to a card—the picture of a young and beautiful girl.

I did not stop to look at it—I did not take time to think that it might be a picture purchasable at any stationer's for twenty-five cents; it was enough for me and my jealous suspicions, that it was concealed in my husband's trunk.

I fairly snatched it up, and facing Augustus abruptly, I held it before him, and asked, my voice trembling with ire:

"Is this your cigar, Augustus?"

His face fell, only a little, but I noticed even that little.

"It's very choice," I sneered—"very."

"Yes," he returned, as he held out his hand for it.

"It is so choice that its counterpart can be obtained at any book-store for a quarter of a dollar."

"Indeed," I sneered, for I had turned it over, and there on the back was written in a delicate hand:

"To my darling.—Floy."

I held it up again, as I asked:

"Nothing extra for that inscription, Augustus?"

"I declare, Martha, you're enough to exasperate a saint! It's nothing, I'm sure—"

"I agree with you," I interrupted, as I put it into my pocket. "The face is very insignificant—very! I'll keep it, thank you; it may prove of use to me in the future."

My husband turned angrily aside, thrusting his hands deep down into his pockets.

"Then you are somebody's darling," I said, in a tone of suppressed wrath.

"Now, Martha, don't be ridiculous! It isn't at all becoming to a woman of your age."

He stopped short, realizing that he had made a *faux pas* as he met the gaze of my flashing eyes.

My age—my vulnerable point; he knew better than to attack me there.

With the intention of conciliating me, I suppose, he stepped towards me, drawing one hand from his pocket.

Oh, unfortunate movement! for with it came a packet of letters, the blue ribbon about which having become unfastened, they fell in a shower to the floor.

He came to a sudden halt, pale with dismay.

"Some more cigars?" I asked, spitefully.

"No," he returned, fiercely. "They're bills."

"Bills? Ha—ha! Bills tied with blue ribbon! They're sweet keepsakes, truly!"

He was making all haste in picking them up.

I made equal haste, and succeeded in gaining possession of one.

The envelope was gone, and the sheet was so folded that I saw the heading:

"My own Darling."

I read it aloud.

"My own Darling!" A bill you said, Augustus. Please tell me—isn't your creditor just a little sentimental?"

"I'll answer your question, Mrs. Ray, by asking another," he returned, with an assumption of dignity that became him very well. "Will you be good enough to give me that letter?"

"I thought you said it was a bill, Augustus?"

"Evidently, it is not. In some way it has become mixed up with these—these old papers," at which words he cast the letters he held into the fire. "It is not mine, I can assure you."

"I'll keep it, Augustus," I said, coolly. "The handwriting—yes, the handwriting is the same as that on the back of the card. I'll keep it; it also may prove of use to me in the future."

"Martha, it might be well if you would obey me in this instance; give me that letter."

For answer, I put it into my pocket.

He turned, and walked proudly to the door.

I loved my husband best when he was dignified, as now. I felt, at such times, that he was my master, and forgot the fact of his being my young husband.

Had he turned then and asked again for the letter and the picture, I should have given them to him without a word; but he did not. He left the room, looking back not once; and I remained behind, angry with myself because at odds with him.

I stood by the mantel, thinking, and idly tracing the figures in the carpet with one foot.

It came in contact with what remained of that twisted note which Augustus had used to light his cigar. Mechanically I stooped and picked it up.

I opened it, and—

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, for, for the third time, that same delicate handwriting met my gaze.

The greater portion had been consumed by the flames; the scorched remnant bore the following words:

"Dec. 5, 1877.
to-day at five.
heart-broken,
argus-eyed wife.
matinee at
"FLOY."

CHAPTER II.

CONFUSION BEGINS.

My first inclination was to scream, my next to faint, and my next to go into hysterics; but I quickly overcame all that.

Calling my severest look into my face, I started for the door, determined to go to Augustus and confront him with this proof of his unfaithfulness to me.

But when I reached the door I thought better of that, also. I turned, and walked slowly back into the room.

"No," I said, to myself; "I will be calm and cautious. I shall gain nothing by storming the citadel; but by a little stratagem I shall soon know the whole truth."

"Can it be?" I asked, as I looked over those words again. "Can it be that Augustus loves me no longer? Oh, if that were so, it would transform me into a fury! I cannot believe it! I will not believe it! And yet this looks very much like it, I'm sure. 'December 5.' Why, that is this very day! She has consented to meet him, I suppose, at some matinee. She is heart-broken, and I am the argus-eyed wife. Oh, yes, it's all clear as day. And her name is Floy. Ah, ha, Miss Floy," and I took the picture from my pocket and studied it intently. "I shall know you now if ever I meet you!"

I looked from the picture to the reflection of myself in the glass, and I sighed; hard as it was, I was forced

ed to admit that the contrast was not favorable to me.

Still, Augustus was mine. It mattered little how fair other women were, they could not win him from me.

There was a grim sort of satisfaction in that reflection, and it dispelled the momentary depreciation I had had of myself.

"To-day, at five—matinee," I muttered, as I slowly left the room. "Where, I wonder? I'll find out."

I descended to the sitting-room.

I was considerably surprised to see Augustus seated there, winding the yarn which he had placed about the back of a chair in front of him.

I smiled upon him approvingly, and then I commenced the exercise of my strategic powers.

Drawing the letter and the picture from my pocket, I said, gently:

"Augustus."

"Well, Martha dear?" and he looked anxiously, first at me, and then at the objects in my hand.

"Do you see these?" I asked.

"I do."

"If I should tell you that I have not read this letter would you believe me?"

"Could I doubt your word, Martha? A woman so exemplary in every respect as yourself."

"There, that will do, Augustus. Don't overdo the matter; keep within bounds, and I shall have a better opinion of your sincerity."

"My sincerity! Do you doubt me, Martha?"

"How could I? And to prove my faith in you I shall throw these into the fire. See?" and I flung picture and letter into the grate.

"You're an angel," he murmured, gratefully.

"At least, you are a very sensible woman, and I admire you for it. Any other man's wife would have made a mountain out of that molehill. I'm sure I love you, my dear, and you'll find that your faith has not been misplaced. Trust in me, Martha, and we will be happy always."

I stooped and kissed him lightly on the forehead, not because of any rush of tenderness, but because I wished to hide the satisfied smile that I could not repress. How easily I had stilled his anxious fears! Now he was off his guard, and entirely at my mercy.

I took the yarn upon my hands, seated myself before him, and our *tete-a-tete* began.

"This is cozy—eh?" he remarked, cheerfully. "I'd like nothing better than to sit here all day and wind this yarn. What unfortunate creatures men are—they have so many calls upon their time—"

"Have you any engagement for this afternoon?"

I asked, quietly.

"I regret to say that I have."

"And I regret to hear that you have, Augustus."

"Why, Martha?"

"Because I had decided to go to some matinee, and to have your company."

"I'm sorry—I'm really very sorry indeed. But business is business, you know. I have an engagement at just two o'clock, that cannot be put off on any account."

"May I ask what it is, Augustus?"

"Certainly—certainly. It is—h'm—h'm, it is—strange how tangled my ideas get sometimes! To-day, December 5th, at five—I mean at two o'clock, I am to meet a party of gentlemen at—I mean out of town, to talk over—Oh, yes; I remember it all now," he added, laughingly. "One of these gentlemen—smart fellow he is, by the way—has invented a shoe for horses which is the best thing of the kind that I've ever seen. There's money in it! As Seller says: 'There's millions in it!' Now, we want to form a company; we'll call it The Patent Horse-shoe Combination, or something of that sort. All we want is capital—"

I compressed my lips, and sniffed ominously. I knew what was coming.

"You've got the man, and the horse-shoe," I said, tartly, "and all you want is money."

"Yes; that's all."

"And where is it to come from?"

"Well, you see, that's to be my share."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. One man puts in experience, the other puts in his horse-shoe, and I'm to put in the money. I tell you, Martha, it's a grand thing! No more horses slipping down on icy streets! Why, blessings will come to me from every horse—I mean, every horse owner in the land! I'll not only be a public benefactor of—of—well, of horses, but I will be gathering unto myself a harvest of riches that will soon lift me far above all the sordid cares of this world!"

"Oh, indeed!"

"Yes; the scheme is so magnificent," he went on, excitedly, "that I feel justified in asking you to advance the capital, which at no late day I shall be able to refund to you, with interest at seven per cent."

I said nothing. I only sniffed again.

He understood well what that meant, and he went on, now almost pleadingly:

"Oh, I wish you could partake of my enthusiasm, Martha. If you could only realize the inestimable benefits that would accrue from this undertaking, you would without a word, without even a murmur, put the money into my hand, give me your blessing, and send me on my way rejoicing."

"I've no doubt about the rejoicing," I said, grimly.

"You've always some scheme on foot, Augustus, each one better than the last—"

"But this—" he interrupted.

"Yes, I understand; this is the best of all. We'll think about it, Augustus."

"Delays are dangerous, you know, Martha."

"Yes, I know. The truth is, I'm going to look into these schemes of yours more closely in the future. I've always lent too willing an ear, I think. The unpleasant reflection steals over me at times that I am

a fool, and that you are presuming on my foolishness. Now, about these subscriptions this past week. Eighty dollars! Why, it's preposterous!"

"But it was given in a good cause, Martha. We must do something for sweet Charity's sake. The objects were most worthy."

"Well, what were they? I'm sure I don't know where one dollar of it all went. You talked so fast and so persuasively, confusing me so, that I didn't know what I was about. If I had, I'm sure I should not have expended eighty dollars in one week on subscription lists. Let me see; there was thirty dollars on Tuesday; what was that for?"

"On Tuesday—thirty dollars," as he rubbed his nose reflectively with one finger. "Oh, yes, I have it! That, my dear Martha, was given toward the very commendable object of raising a fund to enable us to send warming-pans to the benighted heathens of Africa."

"Indeed," I said, looking at him keenly.

His serious face and earnest manner reassured me, and I went on:

"Then on Thursday I gave you thirty dollars more. Warming-pans again?"

"Oh, no. Thursday—thirty dollars more," he mused. "That—Oh, yes! that was given in a cause that enlisted all my sympathies at once; it was to furnish ice cream for the children of the Five Points Mission School. Think of the poor little ones—"

"I'd rather think, just now, of that other twenty dollars. What was that for?"

"It was given to the support of the Society for the Suppression of Vice. There's a great deal of vice about, you know. I hope I have rendered a strict and satisfactory account, Martha. And now, will you allow your thoughts to dwell upon the matter of this Patent Combination—I mean, this Horse-shoe Combination? But really, I must be stirring," he added, as he glanced up at the clock. "I have just time to get ready, and to take lunch, and then I must be off for the train."

"The train?"

"Yes. I'm going out of town, you know."

I allowed him to leave the room without saying anything to him.

I sat deliberating for a few moments, then I arose and ascended to my dressing-room.

I heard him whistling gaily as he proceeded with his toilet.

I chuckled with satisfaction as I proceeded with mine.

Black silk, velvet polonaise, rich lace, furs, a stylish bonnet, light gloves, formed my attire. The mirror gave me a very satisfactory reflection of myself, and I should not now have sighed had I been contrasting myself with the pictured Floy.

Smiling and pleased, I descended to the dining-room, and there I waited for Augustus.

The luncheon bell rang, and soon after I heard him coming.

He entered, faultlessly dressed as usual.

He stopped short as he caught sight of me.

"You will excuse me," I said, sweetly, "if I sit at table with my hat on. I did not wish to keep you waiting."

"Keep me waiting," he exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

"I'm going out, as you see."

"Yes? Where?"

"With you."

"With me?"

"Yes, with you."

"Oh, nonsense, Martha, you can't mean that."

"But I do mean it."

"Why, it's ridiculous; you will allow me to say ridiculous, Martha. You'll be entirely out of place in a horse-shoe combination—"

"Oh, I don't say that I'm going to the conference, but I'll see you off on the train. The carriage is at the door, and I'm sure it will be much more pleasant to go with me than to go alone."

"Oh, certainly—certainly."

He didn't look as if he were overwhelmed with joy; in fact, he seemed quite annoyed, and that deepened my satisfaction.

We ate our luncheon in silence.

I was thoroughly enjoying the situation, but Augustus became more and more gloomy as the moments passed.

He arose, and I did the same.

I was determined not to allow him from my sight for a moment, for I fully believed that he would slip away and trust to fate to appease me with a plausible explanation afterwards.

He went into the hall, and I followed.

He put on his coat slowly, his hat still more slowly, took his cane sadly from the rack, and then, as if a sudden remembrance had come to him, he began slapping his pockets vigorously.

"I declare, Martha," he said, "I've forgotten my handkerchief. Would you—"

"No, I wouldn't," I interrupted, tartly.

"Oh, indeed. Thanks all the same."

With a sigh he opened the door and led me down to the carriage.

He helped me in, cast one despairing glance up and down the street, and with another deeper sigh, he seated himself beside me.

"Augustus, where are we going?" I asked, softly.

"To the devil—I beg your pardon, I mean to the depot."

"Would it not be wise to inform Thomas of that fact?"

"I suppose it would," he returned, gloomily.

Faintly, despairingly, he gave the word to Thomas:

"Forty-second street depot."

We rode along in silence.

Augustus sat looking out of the window as disconsolately as if he were a prisoner behind the bars.

I sat in momentary expectation of hearing him in-

vent some excuse for leaving me, or of giving up the idea of going.

To my surprise he said nothing, and as we neared the depot his accustomed cheerfulness returned.

I attended him into the waiting-room, stood by while he purchased his ticket for Rye, and saw him on board the train.

I then began to think that I had wronged my husband. The words on that scorched slip of paper did not necessarily refer to him. As I argued to myself: if it had been a *billet-doux* of his would he have put it to so ignominious a use as to light his cigar with it?

I waited by till the train moved out of the depot; and, thinking of my husband's handsome face as it had looked from the car window—so smiling and pleased—I returned to my carriage.

It was a bright, beautiful winter's day, crisp and dry; and now that my mind was relieved from suspicion and jealousy, I felt that I could enjoy a ride.

Giving the word to Thomas, he drove me up toward the park.

I leaned back on the cushioned seat, quite content with myself, my husband, and all the world.

I rode around for about half an hour, and then I gave the order for home.

Rather pleasant were my reveries as I sat looking absently out upon the street; but I was suddenly startled from them as my eyes fell upon a form that seemed very familiar.

But no—no, it could not be Augustus! Had I not seen him on board the train, bound for Rye, that was over an hour's ride out? And too, this person was with a lady—a lady with golden hair, in elegant attire, whose daintily-gloved hand rested upon his arm. No—no, it could not be Augustus!

I leaned breathlessly forward, and looked again.

My heart began to beat furiously, my eyes seemed to be starting from their sockets, for as my carriage passed them I saw distinctly that my fears were true.

I glared at them fiercely as they walked slowly on, in blissful unconsciousness of my proximity.

It was the woman whose picture I had seen, whose name I knew to be Floy; and her escort was my young husband!

CHAPTER III.

CONFUSION DEEPENS.

I HALF opened the carriage door, with the intention of springing out and overtaking them, and then and there visiting my indignation and just wrath upon them.

But a moment's reflection caused me to change my mind.

I had no desire to create a scene in the streets; I would wait and watch for a better opportunity.

But, oh! how hard it was to sit quietly and see them as they walked on, she with her beautiful face raised to his, and his eyes looking down into hers!

I waited till I was in a measure calm, then I ordered Thomas to stop.

I alighted, and expressed my intention of walking home.

By this time, the couple—the objects of my wrath—were quite a distance ahead, but I had no difficulty in keeping them in sight.

I took no precautions. If they turned they would have seen me.

But they did not.

Seemingly engrossed with each other, they walked on and on, and I followed, gnashing my teeth, and vowing terrible vengeance upon the head of my young and delinquent husband.

I soon saw they were bound for Booth's.

They entered, and I hastened after, thinking to meet them at the box office.

I was disappointed in that.

I procured the most available seat to be had, and passed on.

Yes, there they were.

From my seat I could see her distinctly; a column hid him from my view. However, I knew that he was there, for I caught one glimpse of his face as he leaned toward her.

All through the performance I sat there watching them, the rage in my heart growing fiercer and fiercer, till it seemed as if I could not remain quiet any longer.

I did not know whether the audience was being regaled with tragedy or comedy, drama or farce; I only knew that my husband was there, and that his companion was a woman, young and beautiful, whose every movement, so full of grace, was torture to me.

Yes, I envied her, and I hated her!

The curtain fell at last, and the audience began to disperse.

I waited, keeping my eyes fastened upon my rival. How my heart throbbed as I saw how deftly her fur-lined cloak was placed about her shoulders—and as she looked up, smiling, and talking animatedly!

She started on, and so did I. My calculation was that we would meet at the entrance, but she gained the lobby before me.

How I chafed and fretted at the crowd that debarred me from springing to her!

Not once did I remove my eyes from her as I slowly edged my way along. Her fair face, and golden hair, crowned with a dainty white bonnet, made her so conspicuous that I had no difficulty in keeping her in sight.

"Ah!"

That exclamation escaped me involuntarily as I saw her come to a standstill in the lobby. She had met with some one; I saw her smiling and talking, and once a sweet, silvery strain of laughter was wafted to my ears.

Now was my time!

I fear I was rude enough to try to force myself for-

ward; I felt that several pairs of eyes were darting indignant glances at me, but I heeded it not.

At last—at last, I was near them—the group of three—Floy, my husband and another gentleman.

I was fairly panting by this time. My heart throbbed exultantly as I contemplated the triumph that was before me. I had only to reach forth my hand, say one word, and I should stand victorious before a crest-fallen, humiliated trio!

If my husband had looked up he would have seen me; if she had turned she would have seen me. I wondered that my burning gaze did not force them to turn to me.

I stood for one moment enjoying the anticipation of my triumph, then I reached forth my hand.

At the very same instant the three started off abruptly toward the entrance.

It was some time before I quite comprehended my defeat; I looked blankly after them, then I started on also, but ere I had taken a half dozen steps I felt a hand upon my arm, and I heard a gay voice say:

"My dear Mrs. Ray, I'm so glad to see you!"

I groaned in spirit. It was my very voluble friend, Mrs. Pemberton, from Mott Haven.

I cast one despairing glance toward the entrance; I saw the golden hair and the dainty white bonnet, then I turned to my friend and answered her greeting.

A very pretty woman was this Mrs. Pemberton, and a very knowing one, too. She seemed to know everything about everybody—always had some little surprise for every person she met—was always on the point of getting up some *fete*—was always smiling and talking; in short, she was a very active and agreeable person, but the last one in the world that I wished to meet just now.

"My dear Mrs. Ray, I am positively delighted to see you! As I said to your husband this afternoon—"

"My husband!" I exclaimed, as I withdrew my glance from my rival who had just passed out into the dusk of the winter evening, and looked in surprise at my smiling friend.

"Yes, your husband," she laughed. "I knew I would surprise you. I met him this afternoon as I was coming to town. He boarded the train at— Let me see—at or about Eightieth street, and was my very agreeable companion for the remainder of my ride."

So! now I could understand how it was that Augustus was in the city while I was indulging in the fond belief that he was speeding towards Rye.

Such an act of deceit had never occurred to me.

Oh, foolish, trusting woman, how is your faith abused by deceitful man!

In this interval I had lost sight of my rival. I moved quickly on, trying to follow Mrs. Pemberton's volubility, and answering hap-hazard now and then.

We reached the entrance. I looked up and down the street, and with difficulty I suppressed an exclamation of satisfaction as I saw Miss Floy standing in the light of the lamp on the corner.

As I looked, she placed her hand upon the arm of her escort, and they moved on.

"Oh! must I lose such an opportunity as this?"

I felt as if I could throttle Mrs. Pemberton, and cast her into some dark corner, if I could not get rid of her in any other way.

I knew that she was putting some question to me; I caught the words "Christmas" and "Company," and I said in reply:

"Are you?"

"Yes, I am."

"Oh, indeed."

"Yes, and it will be really grand," she went on, while I began to wonder what it was that promised so well. "There will be the Sharps, and the Viles, and the Drums—"

"A brass band, eh?" I asked absently, as I strained my eyes after the couple that were fast disappearing from my sight.

"Why, Mrs. Ray, who said anything about a brass band?"

"You, to be sure. Were you not talking of harps and viols, and drums—"

"Oh, dear, no, not at all! I mean the Drums—drums with a capital D, the family of Drums, you know. And you'll come, Mrs. Ray?"

"To the Drums?"

"Dear me! How very absent-minded you are to-day, Mrs. Ray! Here I've been airing my choicest adjectives in eloquent description of the *fete* I'm getting up for the coming holidays, and I don't believe you've heard a word! Will you come? Your husband has already accepted my invitation, contingent, of course, upon your pleasure. Now, say that you'll come."

I said it gladly, for it promised to release me from her company. Hastily making my adieux, I started on after the couple which was only dimly visible to me now.

Street after street we traversed, and slowly I gained upon them.

"A few more blocks," I whispered, breathlessly;

"a few more blocks, and I shall be up to them."

Then I was disappointed by seeing them stop at one of the mansions on the avenue. If only I could reach them now!

But no; they parted hurriedly. I saw her gaze up into his face; I saw him stoop and kiss her hand; then she hurried up the steps, and he walked briskly on.

Summoning all my energies to my aid, I started after him in hot pursuit.

Again and again I gave up in despair; I could not overtake him.

Then the fates aided me; a gust of wind sent his hat whirling back toward me. By the time he had regained it, I was quite near to him; a few more steps, and I was by his side.

Panting, breathless, trembling in every limb, I

kept pace with him for a moment; then, grasping his arm fiercely, I cried—and from excitement my voice was harsh, and high, and quivering:

"Now, sir, you'll explain to me what all this means!"

He turned quickly toward me.

Blinded with rage, I shook his arm roughly, as I added:

"I've followed you, sir, and—"

"Madame!"

I saw his face then, and oh, horror!—it was not my husband—it was a stranger!

CHAPTER IV.

THE LOST GLOVE.

ONE glance sufficed to show me that I had overtaken, and spoken thus shrewdly to a stranger.

The discovery—the humiliating discovery—overwhelmed me. I fairly staggered to a stoop at hand, and there, faint and breathless, I supported myself for a moment.

I felt that this stranger was regarding me closely, curiously. I dared not look at him again. I kept my face averted till I had conquered my weakness in a measure; then, without heeding the words that he was addressing to me, without looking at him, even, I started abruptly down the street.

"Will he follow me?" I whispered to myself.

"Will he try to learn who I am? Oh, no—not that must not happen. He may be a friend to Augustus, and if he discovers that I am his wife, it would publish all to the world. No—not at any cost he must not learn who I am. But perhaps he knows already; his face was strange to me, but he may have seen me before, and may have recognized me now. Oh! if so—"

At this juncture, I looked timidly back to see if my fear was transpiring.

No, he was not following me.

He stood in the light of the lamp, watching out not following me.

I sighed with relief at that, and was about to turn to go on, when I saw him stoop and pick up something from the street.

I could not discern what it was, of course, but at the same instant I missed one of my gloves.

"How unfortunate!" I exclaimed. "And every button of that glove has my monogram upon it! But there is no help for it," I added, disconsolately, as I started on. "I can't go back and demand it of him. He'll have to keep it, and with it, discover my identity if he can."

"How could I have made this mistake?" I mused, as I hastened along. "Certainly it was Augustus whom I saw with her this afternoon; and it was Augustus who was with her in the theater. It was she whom I followed to-night, I know; I saw her face distinctly as they parted at the stoop. When did the change of escort take place? I suppose I have to thank Mrs. Pemberton for this humiliation; it was to listen to her twaddle that I lost sight of Augustus. I wonder if—"

I had reached the corner, and I peered back again to see if I were being followed.

No. He was no longer in sight. Still, I dared not go directly home; that I could not see him was no evidence that he was not in the vicinity, so I dared not go directly home.

It was dark, and it was cold. How I longed to be by my cheerful fireside! Instead, I felt forced to tread the streets, back and forth, so as to elude a probable pursuer. And why? Because of my husband's misdemeanor. And he, the offending one, was snugly sheltered from cold and darkness, while I, the injured party, had the suffering to endure!

The keenest sting of all to me was that unless I would acknowledge my humiliation, and give Augustus the chance to triumph over me, I must say not one word of all this to him. I must stem the torrent of my wrath, with which I so longed to overwhelm him.

At last, I ventured to approach my home. Timidly I drew near, looking about me at every step, fearing and half-expecting to feel a hand upon my arm, and to hear the stranger's voice in words of recognition.

I was shivering from head to foot, my teeth were chattering, and my hands, especially the ungloved one, were benumbed with cold.

All this, in such a cause, and yet I must keep silence.

Oh, it was too much! To have the power right in my hand to make my husband bow before me, and yet I must not use it because of the mistake that had occurred.

I reached the stoop.

One timid look about me, and I ventured to ascend. So excited was my imagination by this time, that I should not have been at all surprised to see this unknown appear suddenly before me, like the clown in a pantomime, and flaunt that glove right in my face.

But I was spared this much-feared encounter.

I rang the bell, and was admitted, and once in the hall, I began to feel safe.

"Is Mr. Ray at home?" I asked of Philander, who was porter and waiter in one.

"He's at dinner, ma'am," was the reply.

I proceeded at once to the dining room, and through the half-open door I saw my husband sitting *solus* at table, making all possible haste in dispatching the viands upon his plate.

Evidently he had not heard me enter, for he began sounding the call-bell furiously, angrily, while he muttered:

"Why doesn't that rascal come? He knows that I'm in a hurry. It's—it's—why, it's after six now! Ten to one, if I don't get off soon, I—"

The rest of the sentence was drowned in the ringing of the bell.

"Just in time," I thought to myself. "Five minutes more, and Augustus would not have been here."

I entered quietly, saying softly:

"Can't I help you, Augustus? What will you have?"

"The deuce!" he exclaimed, dropping his knife and fork with a clatter, and starting up like a rocket. Then, recovering himself, he added, as he sprang to me:

"Why, Martha, dear, where have you been?"

"First let me ask you a question, Augustus: Where are you going? or, rather, where *were* you going?"

"Going!" he exclaimed, in a tone of righteous indignation. "Going! My best beloved, can you ask me where I was going?"

"I can. And why?"

"Why? Oh, Martha, do you think that I am devoid of feeling? Did you not send the carriage home early in the afternoon?"

"I did. But what—"

He interrupted me by crying in a loud voice:

"For three long hours I have been seated here with my fears—"

"Good company, Augustus?"

"Don't jest. I have thought, and I have worried. That you should be away at this hour of the day was great cause for alarm. All sorts of reasons have been suggesting themselves to me, and I was just on the point of starting out in search of you. I should have gone everywhere, Martha, dear; the voice of the town-crier should have been heard in the land; the whole noble army of martyrs—I mean the detectives, should have been detailed to aid me. Dead or alive we should have found you, Martha. If dead, then would rejoicing have filled this house; if alive—ah, me—ah, me, what weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth—"

"I believe you, Augustus," I interrupted, tartly.

"Eh? What?" he exclaimed, anxiously, evidently brought to a sense of what he had been saying, by my sharp tone, and severe looks. "Have I spoken amiss? It is the fault of my enthusiasm, my dear—the fault of my enthusiasm," he repeated, absently, as he glanced despairingly at the clock. "I have really been very much alarmed about you, Martha, and I'm desperately sorry—"

"That I've returned," I supplied, as he hesitated.

"Now, Martha—"

"Now, Augustus," I mocked. "However," I added, as I removed my bonnet, "explanations are tedious; let us dispense with them. I am here, and there is no need for the town-crier, nor the endeavors of the noble army and yourself. Let us dine."

Augustus reseated himself at the table, looking very much like a member of a Methodist congregation at the words: "let us pray."

I made a remark about the Patent Horse-shoe Combination.

Magic words!

Augustus expanded into good-humor at once.

"Yes; we had a very satisfactory meeting," he said, heartily, "I have a drawing of it with me," and he began to fumble about in his vest-pocket.

"Of the meeting?" I asked.

"Of the meeting!" he exclaimed, disdainfully.

"No; of the horse-shoe. There it is."

And he passed to me a card.

I took it, looked at it, saw that it was the railroad ticket he had purchased that afternoon, and was about to wether him with a few words, when, happening to turn the ticket over, I saw, written there in pencil:

"Miss Florence Haverhill,

"No. — Fifth Avenue."

This unexpected information suggested to me a new way of revenging myself upon my rival.

I said nothing, but studied the address attentively.

"What do you think of it?" asked Augustus.

"It's just what I wanted," I replied, absently.

"Just what you wanted!—you—a horse-shoe?" he exclaimed, in surprise.

"Come—come, Martha, don't be aggravating. What do you think of it?"

"Excellent," I said, heartily. "In fact, I am so pleased," I added, as I arose from the table, "that I shall go at once to my desk, and make some notes in reference to it."

"That is just what I expected of you, Martha," he murmured, gratefully. "You're a noble woman—an ornament to your sex."

I listened to his flatteries, and then I ascended to my room to make my notes upon the horse-shoe.

I seated myself at my escritoire, took up a pen, and dipping it into the ink I made a preparatory flourish to the writing of such bitter, scathing words as should cause the fair Floy to bow with shame and humiliation.

Aloft, my arm was arrested as my eyes fell upon a small paper parcel; from which protruded the fingers of a glove—a glove, which, I soon ascertained, was the one I had lost.

All my vengeful purposes vanished as I looked upon it.

How had it come there?

Who had brought it?

Did Augustus know of it?

Such queries flashed through my mind, irritating me; and I arose, and paced impatiently to and fro, as I wondered who this unknown could be, and as I tried to rid myself of the feeling of discomfort with which the occurrence filled me.

The consequence of this was that, through fear of I knew not what, when Augustus laid before me the details of the requirements of the Horse-shoe Com-

bination, I acceded to his wishes at once, and he went on his way rejoicing.

CHAPTER V.

UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS.

BREAKFAST-TIME, two weeks later.

I was seated behind the silver coffee-urn, looking over the morning mail, while waiting for Augustus.

With all my troubles, I felt quite content.

Sunshine and fire-light glorified the room, and played upon the array of cut glass, and silver, and snowy damask, with which the table was freighted.

My negligé of black silk, tastily adorned with bows of cardinal red, seemed to suit me very well. I was more than satisfied with myself as I looked at my image in the glass over the side table. I thought that my pretty little breakfast-cap of white swiss and lace was particularly becoming.

All in all, it was a pleasing picture; the room, the table, and myself, and I felt justified in contemplating it with pride and vanity.

At last Augustus entered; of course, in faultless attire, and as smiling as a May morning.

"Augustus," I said, gently, as I passed him a cup of fragrant coffee, "what about Christmas?"

"Why, it's coming, I believe, Martha, dear."

"Thank you. Perhaps you'll be as facetious in answering my next question; have you made any arrangements for the holidays?" and I eyed him keenly.

"Have I?" he mused. "Have I? I scarcely think I have, my darling."

He spoke cautiously, as if he were feeling his way.

"So far so good. I have a letter here from Mrs. Pemberton, Augustus," and I took it up, and eyed him keenly again. "She gives us a very urgent invitation for the holidays. Do you favor the idea of accepting it?"

"Candidly, Martha, I do not."

"No? And why?"

"I am sure a quiet time here with you would be much more pleasant; you and I together—"

"But by the time Christmas has come your 'you and I' will have dwindled down to myself alone. I think, Augustus, we will go to Mrs. Pemberton's."

"Will you allow me to veto your proposition, Martha?"

"No, sir, I will not. I wish to go to Mrs. Pemberton's, and I intend that you shall accompany me."

He arose with a sigh.

Nothing could have made me more anxious to go than this opposition on his part. Knowing that he had already assured Mrs. Pemberton of his presence, I felt that he had some reason for wishing to go alone, and I was determined to thwart him.

"We will go," I said, imperatively. "And we will go either to-day or to-morrow."

Augustus had screened himself behind the morning paper, and he now looked over it at me, and to my surprise, said, cheerily:

"Yes, we will go. Now that I have thought over the matter, Martha, it promises well. Yes, we will go, as you say, either to-day or to-morrow."

His sudden acquiescence rather nonplussed me. I could not say anything, but I determined to be on the watch so that he could not play me false again.

My thoughts were diverted from that subject in the course of the day by the arrival of a letter from my orphan niece, Inez Churchill.

What an inopportune time she had chosen to pay me a visit! And she gave me no opportunity of telling her that I should not be able to devote myself to her, for her letter ran:

"I shall come on at once, dear aunt. Please meet me upon the arrival of the evening express."

Now it seemed to me that Boston was a much more suitable place for her than New York. I had always thought so, and had impressed her with that idea so strongly that she had never, till now, offered to visit me.

To be sure, she was my dead sister's child, but absence had made affection for her impossible. I had seen her but a few times during her life. Since my marriage I had no desire to see her, for she was young, and beautiful, and sprightly—too young, and beautiful, and sprightly to be placed in daily contact with myself, when my young husband was by as critic.

Still, her letter was in my hand, and she was coming; there was nothing to do but to let her come.

The afternoon wore away, and Augustus had not yet come.

I had spent several hours in making elaborate preparations for an extended visit at Mrs. Pemberton's; I was determined that my niece's coming should not thwart me in my intention of going.

At four o'clock, I said, impatiently:

"It is very evident that we will not go to-day. Well, I suppose I must start for the depot, since the train is due at five."

I made myself ready, and reluctantly, I must confess, began the descent to my carriage.

Philander met me at the door with a note.

"Just come, ma'am," he said. "One of them District Telegram boys brought it, ma'am."

I took it, and opened it with a venomous air.

I guessed what was coming.

Yes—just as I had expected.

I read:

"DEARLY BELOVED: I have been yearning so to fly to your side to gain relief from harassing care (the horse-shoes are taxing me severely), and now, at this late hour, find myself obliged to remain to try to discover a discrepancy that has arisen in the books of the company. Of course we cannot now go to your estimable friend, Mrs. Pemberton, to-day; it

will have to be to-morrow. Let us be thankful that there is a to-morrow!

"Don't delay dinner on my account, dear one. Eat, drink, and be merry—you have good company, yourself, so saith the good judge, myself—and think of me as sitting with my hands pressed tight to my throbbing head, poring over the huge columns of a ledger; or, perhaps it is the columns of a huge ledger. However it is, I am, as ever, Your devoted

"Augustus."

"Those horseshoes!" I exclaimed, impatiently, as I tore the note into bits. "I am to be neglected, set aside, imposed upon, and all in the interest of the horseshoe! To-morrow," I added, threateningly, "he shall not leave my sight—he shall not leave this house till I go with him."

I had not the time to think longer upon the matter, for it was almost five o'clock.

I hastened to the carriage, and was driven rapidly to the depot.

There I alighted, hurried to the waiting-room, then through it, and out upon the platform.

Trains were coming and going, and people were passing quickly to and fro.

I looked about sharply for my niece. I fancied I saw her, and darted forward.

Every other person, it seemed to me, contrived to get in my way.

I stumbled against first one, and then another. It was like going through numerous gates, on a tortuous road, where "I beg your pardon" was the password.

"Ah, madame," I heard, as I collided with still another.

"I beg your pardon," I began, but the last word died away in a faint whisper, as I recognized the man before me.

It was the unknown—he whom I had overtaken, and who had found my glove—the very glove that was now upon my hand.

He evidently recognized me, for a smile fluttered over his face.

I turned aside abruptly, confusedly, but he stayed me by saying:

"We have met before, Mrs. Ray. Did you receive your glove?"

"Yes," I snapped. "You were very kind. Pray accept my thanks."

He bowed profoundly, saying:

"I have long desired to meet the wife of Mr. Ray, with whom I have a slight acquaintance; but I never dared to hope that it would come about in the exceedingly romantic way in which it did."

I turned upon him suddenly, and was about to give vent to the rage with which my heart was teeming at his cool insolence, when, to my amazement, I saw my husband approaching.

I stood speechless, staring at him blankly.

Smiling and pleased, he drew near; but at the sharp, rasping "Ahem!" that I could not suppress, he started, and turned pale.

His eyes fell upon me then, and oh! how quickly his smiles vanished.

I thought at first that he was about to beat an inglorious retreat; but no—as if a sudden idea had entered his mind, he walked resolutely toward me with an expression of intensest severity upon his face.

Placing his hand upon my arm, he said, in a freezing tone:

"Martha, why are you here?"

From annoyance at meeting this stranger, and surprise at seeing Augustus, I was so bewildered that I quite forgot why I had come.

"I—I—" I began, helplessly.

"I've no doubt," he interrupted, coldly, as he drew my hand upon his arm. "Be kind enough to come with me, at once, Martha."

I was as tractable as a lamb while possessed with my present emotions, and I accompanied him without a word.

He led me to the carriage.

"Home," was his curt order to Thomas, as he helped me in.

"Augustus, what does this mean?" I breathed, as he seated himself beside me, and closed the door sharply.

"Not a word, if you please, Martha," he said, sternly, "till we reach home."

"But—" I began.

"Not a word, I say. Pray have the goodness to regard my wish."

From sheer surprise, I obeyed him.

I did not speak again till we stood face to face in our drawing-room.

He was pale, his eyes were fairly blazing, and in fine frenzy rolling.

"Now, Martha," he began, in a tone of suppressed rage, "you went to that depot to meet that man—now confess it!"

"Why, Augustus—"

"Don't try to equivocate. I say you went there to meet him! you have met him before! Am I not right?"

"Yes," I faltered, completely taken aback by this unusual exhibition of anger.

"Where? When? How? Tell me that!" he cried.

Tell him that? never!

I compressed my lips at these words of his, and remained silent.

"You will not tell me!" he cried. "Oh, Martha, such faith as I have had in you—such fond faith, and now to have it shaken like this!"

"Don't be a fool, Augustus!"

"A fool! Do you call me a fool because I thus resent such meetings as I have witnessed this evening?"

If I did not love you, would I care? No! It is because I do love you that I feel it so keenly. Oh, Martha—

Martha, how have I been deceived in you? But I will avenge my wrongs!" he cried, as he started suddenly from me. "That man's blood shall pay for the in-

justice done me! He has pretended to be my friend, but like a thief in the night, he has stolen in and robbed me of the affections of my wife. Oh, Martha—Martha, would to God I had never lived to see this—this night! Good-by—good-by," and he sprang to the door. "I shall seek till I find him, and then either his life or mine shall atone for this wrong! If I fail, Martha, you will be free to love whom you will! Good-by."

One gesture of agony, and he was gone.

I was stunned, dazed, literally spell-bound. I did not recover from my stupor, nor fully realize what had occurred, till I heard the street-door close with a bang.

Then I started to the hall, crying:

"My God, what will he do? Can it be that he is so insanely jealous as this? Oh, Augustus—Augustus, come back!"

But only the cruel words from Philander came in answer:

"He's gone, ma'am, he's gone."

But where—where? That was now my painful query.

I returned to the drawing-room, and there I paced wildly back and forth as I tried to think what I could do—where I could go—how I could save Augustus from the terrible consequence of his passion.

The address of Miss Florence Haverhill darted into my mind.

"Ah!" I cried, "I will go there!" There is just a chance that I may learn something from her. It is all I can do. I will go; I cannot remain here in this suspense."

In a few moments more I was speeding up the avenue.

I reached the house. Quickly I ascended the stoop, vigorously I rang the bell, and impatiently I waited for a reply.

It came at length.

"Is Miss Haverhill in?" I asked, pantingly.

"No, ma'am, she's out."

"Oh, dear—dear," I moaned. "The rest of the family—are they—"

"She ain't got no family, ma'am. Besides, everybody's out—gone a visiting, ma'am—went this evening."

I turned away in despair.

"If it's anything important, ma'am, I could send word. Miss Florence has gone to Mott Haven, to visit a lady by the name of Pemberton—"

"Ah!" I exclaimed.

That piece of information from the knight of the door-bell scattered the mists that had been enveloping me, as if by magic.

I saw through it all.

I understood Augustus' hesitation to accompany me to Mrs. Pemberton's; I understood his presence at the depot; I understood his discomfiture on beholding me, and I understood the subsequent severity he had called to his face.

It did not take me a moment to decide upon what I would do.

It was not late, scarcely six o'clock, and Augustus had not a very great start of me. I would go at once to Mott Haven, meet him there, and teach him a lesson he would never forget.

"He is probably gloating over his success in having so skillfully eluded me," I muttered, as I boarded the train. "But I'll change his rejoicing to sorrow."

In due time I reached my destination—a large and stately house situated on the Harlem river.

My rage drowned all considerations that might otherwise have disturbed me.

Without hesitation, I entered the grounds, and was soon admitted to the lighted hall.

I heard gay voices and merry laughter proceeding from a room on my right.

I signified my intention of entering unannounced, and I approached quietly.

At the open door I paused, and this is what I saw and heard:

My husband was standing before his hostess, bowing profusely and talking glibly, while disposed about the room were the other guests who had come to participate in the fete.

All eyes were upon Augustus as he spoke:

"Yes, it is to be lamented. She sent her most heartfelt regrets, and insisted that I should be their bearer. At this very moment she is speeding, at the rate of thirty miles an hour—"

He looked up suddenly, probably attracted by my burning gaze. A stop—a pause, an awful pause; a start, and then utmost confusion reigned.

I lost sight of my husband for a moment; but the next I discovered him making frantic exertions to extricate himself from the wreck of a chair over which he had fallen in his surprise and dismay.

CHAPTER VI.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

THE events of last evening are still whirling in my head to such an extent that I have come up here to my room, away from the noisy, chattering company, to be alone that I may think it over calmly.

The snow-storm was fitting conclusion to my troubles; but all nature is as calm and smiling this morning as is my mind.

Poor Inez! I forgot all about her in the confusion at the depot; but I presume she did not come, or I should have seen or heard of her before this.

I had gotten thus far in my musings when Mrs. Pemberton entered, in her breezy way, with innumerable ribbons flying about her.

Why did that woman wear so many ribbons?

Her salutation was:

"My dear Mrs. Ray, why will you come up here by yourself, when everything is so gay down stairs?"

Can you understand why Floy Haverhill will persist

in wearing purple? It is not becoming to her, I am sure. Between you and me, I shouldn't wonder if she used Bloom of Youth upon her face; though I would not speak of it, or even hint such a thing, for the world! Well, here I am forgetting what I came for."

I ventured to ask her if she had come for anything in particular.

"We're getting up a sleigh-ride for this evening, and we want to know what you think of it. Your husband seems charmed with the idea. You'll go, won't you? Of course you will. And now, tell me what I ought to wear. By-the-way, did you ever notice Mr. Filkin's mustache?"

Not having paid much attention to Mr. Filkin's mustache, I told Mrs. Pemberton so, and asked the reason for the question.

"Of course, this is a secret," she replied, "but I have my reasons for thinking that it is dyed. Don't mention such a thing as coming from me—will you? Then I may say that you are in favor of the ride. How good of you to agree so readily! We are going to New Rochelle for supper, dancing, and anything else that promises pleasure. If I were in your place, Mrs. Ray, I wouldn't allow my husband to sit by the side of Floy Haverhill during the ride. Those two have altogether too much to whisper about; but it's none of my business, of course. And now, you dear, delightful woman, I'm going to see how the others are passing their time."

She left the room in the same fluttering way in which she had entered, without even giving me time to accept or refuse her invitation.

Of course, being away from home, the preparations which I could make for the ride were necessarily few, but I had commenced to make these, for I was determined to look as well in Augustus' eyes as any one else, when my young husband entered the room.

His face was a perfect picture of despair, and the manner in which he threw himself—I can't express it in different words—into a chair, told plainly that all was not well with him.

"Augustus, dear, what is the matter?"

"My love, why should I trouble you with all the vexations that make my life a turbulent one?"

"But, tell me; what has happened now? Perhaps I can help you."

"You can, Martha, dear, indeed, you can help me. But my manhood rebels—I cannot tell you how—no, I cannot!"

"It's money again, I suppose," I said, sharply.

"Well, yes, it is. The whole story, in a few words, is, that my poor old nurse, who directed my infant steps and cherished my infant prattle, is lying, poor and uncared for, at the point of death. Poor soul! how well I remember the dear old tunes with which she soothed my eyes to rest. Martha, that poor old nurse needs a little money before she dies."

"How much?"

"I think a hundred dollars would do the thing up in style. There's the sleigh, and the supper—I mean the coffin and the rest—yes, with that amount she could die easy."

I hesitated for a moment; I feared that he was not telling the truth; but finally I gave him the money, and thinking that his story might be true, I said, consolingly:

"I hope, Augustus, that your old nurse may really be soothed by you in her dying hour."

"My dear Martha," he replied, as he carelessly put the money in his pocket, "I hope she may be the means by which I shall get many more dollars out of you—I mean that you may have the pleasure of soothing her in a pecuniary way, yet again. Now I will hasten to her relief."

"But shall you be back in time for the sleigh-ride?"

"Martha, how can I think of sleigh-rides when old nurses are passing away? I cannot think of riding. Shall you remain here to greet me when I return from the bedside of pain, or shall you join the gay revellers?"

"I shall remain here, of course, Augustus, if you are coming back."

"Ere Aurora gilds the reddening east, I shall be with my Martha again."

"I should hope so."

"I mean I will return early this evening."

He went, or at least I believed he did, to visit his old nurse.

And from my window I watched the merry company as they started in one large sleigh, wishing not a little that I was with them.

The party had been gone nearly two hours, when by the merest accident I entered the smoking-room, and there, to my surprise, I found Augustus' morning coat.

What could he have worn when he went out?

A horrible suspicion flashed across my mind, and I ran back to my room.

One glance in the wardrobe showed me that Augustus had worn his dress-coat!

Now, when a man dons his dress-coat in which to visit a dying nurse, it looks queer, to say the least.

I was angry, frantic. What could I do?

I knew that the sleighing party had gone to New Rochelle. Mrs. Pemberton had said that Augustus appeared delighted when the ride was proposed. He had come to me about his old nurse almost immediately afterward. Was it not a ruse? Is he not with the party?

Resolved to know, I went to the nearest stable, ordered a carriage, and started in hot pursuit.

The moments seemed hours, and the horses, which were really going at a rapid rate, seemed hardly to move.

But we reached New Rochelle at last.

It was not difficult to learn what the destination of the sleighing-party had been.

I followed the directions given me, entered the

house unobserved, and found that the company were gathered in one of the front rooms.

I looked in; how can I describe what I saw! At one end of the room was my husband, standing by the side of Florence Haverhill, who was dressed in white. A clergyman stood before them.

Great Heavens! A marriage ceremony! My—What took place afterward, appeared to me as through a reddish mist.

Hissing sounds filled my ears; my breath failed me, and from head to foot I shivered as with a chill.

I saw the bridal party; I saw consternation written on my husband's face. After that I saw nothing more. I felt that I was sitting somewhere, opposite somebody, and that this somebody was forcing between my teeth the neck of a flask of brandy.

CHAPTER VII.

CONJUGAL DISCIPLINE.

"Yes, Augustus."

Meek, very meek was my tone, and I was sitting in an attitude of match; my head was bowed upon my breast, my hands were clasped together in my lap, and I was twirling my thumbs in a penitent sort of way, looking at them pensively the while.

The fact is, I was on the stool of repentance. My husband stood by me, looking down upon me with a lordly air, and to all of his assertions I could only reply meekly:

"Yes, Augustus."

For I was thoroughly humiliated—thoroughly ashamed of myself in consequence of the previous evening's adventure?

Why had I not stopped to look and to understand affairs ere I burst so abruptly upon the pleasure party, and created such a scene as then transpired?

When it was all explained to me—when I learned that the party had been indulging in the innocent and harmless amusement of enacting charades and tableaux, of an impromptu order, I was, to speak figuratively, bowed to the dust.

I realized that I had made myself an object of ridicule; I also realized that I had given my husband cause to blush for me, and I felt as if I could never—never smile again.

My husband's display of magnanimity wiped out all thought of the wrongs and injuries done me, and elevated him in my estimation considerably.

He accounted for my strange and sudden appearance to the different members of the party, in different ways.

I overheard him saying to one (who, by the way, was the very Mr. Filkins, of whose mustache Mrs. Pemberton entertained such serious and distressing doubts), that I was his mother-in-law.

I was too grateful for any endeavor on his part to extricate me from my embarrassing position, to say a word in dissent, or to take umbrage at the falsification.

I submitted meekly to everything, which penitent and contrite spirit had not departed on the following morning, when I was seated in the room that had been assigned to me at Mrs. Pemberton's, and my husband stood by me, acting victor, conqueror, lord, despot, to perfection.

"You admit that you have made a fool of yourself, Martha?" he said, in a firm, severe tone.

"Yes, Augustus," was my meek reply.

"I'm thankful for that!" he exclaimed. "To be aware of our shortcomings is a good stride toward improvement. You must remember, Martha, that I'm a man, and that you are a woman; and that, as a man, it is galling, humiliating to feel obliged to map out to you, a woman, every move I make—every step I take. I, as a man, am privileged to go here and there without first coming to you, a woman, and asking: 'May I go? Can I go?' You, a woman, should not expect it of me, a man! And I," and he raised his voice as if he were delivering an harangue, and had just reached the climax:

"I, a man, positively refuse to be tortured and commanded by you, a woman! Have you followed me, Martha?"

"Yes, Augustus," and I twirled my thumbs penitently, and sighed deeply.

"These premises being made and understood, I will proceed," he continued, with a grand flourish of his right arm, which resulted in sending the high tortoise-shell comb I wore into the furthest corner of the room.

He looked after it for a moment, then turning to me again, he went on:

"To proceed—to proceed—h'm—h'm—by-the-way, Martha, where was I?"

"Where were you?" I asked, absently. "Where were you? Why, here, just where you are now, Augustus."

"Oh, no—no! You don't grasp my meaning at all, Martha. Pray exert yourself a little, and endeavor to grasp my meaning. Let me see—where was I? Oh, yes! I believe I had ventured the assertion that you had made a fool of yourself, and you were sensible enough to agree with me. Am I right, Martha?"

"Yes, Augustus."

Another penitent twirl of my thumbs, and another deep sigh.

"Then we understand each other perfectly. Now, Martha, I will forgive and forget upon condition—"

I looked up as he hesitated, and I sniffed ominously, for I expected to hear him demand a price for his magnanimity.

He smiled sadly upon me, as if pitying me for harboring so erroneous a supposition, and then he completed his sentence:

"Upon condition that you promise never to repeat the offense."

Relieved by his words, I subsided into meekness again, and replied:

"Yes, Augustus."

"Very well—very well, indeed, very—very well! Now, Martha, look up—look right in my eyes. There, that's it! Now, 'lend me your ears.' That's it—thank you. Now," and he made a gesture as if he were about to spit upon his hands, preparatory to the commencement of the task he had set before him. "I am your husband—in other words, you are my wife; or, to express it more elegantly, you have the honor of being my wife—I should have said, I have the honor of being your husband. However, the length and breadth of the matter is this: We are man and wife. I am the man—you, the wife. See?"

"Yes, Augustus," as I held my head up at a very uncomfortable angle, and met the gaze of his dark brown eyes.

"Well, that being the case, I should command, and you obey?"

"Yes, Augustus."

"Good—very good! Since you have been so sensible as to admit that you are a fool, I beg your pardon, I mean that you made a fool of yourself last night, you will probably agree with me when I say that you are very jealous."

"Yes, Augustus."

"And suspicious."

"Yes, Augustus."

"And unreasonable."

"Yes, Augustus."

"And ungenerous."

"Yes, Augustus."

"And often, somewhat uncharitable."

"Yes, Augustus."

"And at times, extremely penurious."

My eyes flashed then, warning him not to go too far. He wisely stopped there.

A moment's pause, and then he added, impressively:

"Now, I, your husband, command you, Martha, my wife, to put away all jealousy, suspicion, unreasonableness, ungenerousness, uncharitableness, and particularly penuriousness. I command you, and I expect to be obeyed. Will you obey?"

"Yes, Augustus."

"That's a dear, sensible woman! I may say, a very dear, and a very sensible woman! Now, let me enter a little more into detail; if you see me looking at, or perhaps talking to, one of the feminine sex, don't allow yourself to harbor the ridiculous—you will allow me to say ridiculous—the ridiculous idea that I am in love with her, and thus unfaithful to you. Understand?"

"Yes, Augustus."

"And if I tell you that I am going down town, and you should happen to meet me up town, don't be so foolish—you will excuse me if I say foolish—so foolish as to believe that I have wilfully deceived you. Understand?"

"Yes, Augustus."

"And if I say that I am going to the office, and you should happen to meet me at the opera, will you be so charitable—you will not object to my saying charitable—so charitable as to remember that I have only exercised a man's privilege of changing his mind? Will you remember?"

"Yes, Augustus."

He looked at me sharply for several seconds; then rubbing his hands together in a satisfied way, he said, heartily:

"I think you'll do—I really think you will."

Evidently he was pleased at the result of his labor. For the first time he saw me submissive before him, and he was thoroughly enjoying the novelty.

How long would it last? That was a question that had not yet suggested itself to him, but that had already entered my mind.

He turned away from me, and I felt at liberty to move my head from the uncomfortable angle at which I had been holding it.

He stopped before the glass, and as he added a few finishing touches to his toilet ere he should descend into the presence of Mrs. Pemberton's guests, he spoke, peremptorily:

"You will go down, Martha, and deport yourself as if nothing had occurred. Thank Heaven! you did not speak last night—no words of yours can be brought up as witnesses against you; it was all pantomime, very pointed, and unmistakable in its drift, to be sure, but still you are saved—saved by your silence. As I have said, deport yourself as if nothing had occurred, and participate in the general joy. And do—do, Martha, dear, do allow me to look at others than yourself without considering it sufficient cause to create a scene."

"You are aware, I suppose," he added, lightly, "that to-night is the night of the ball. You will try to look your best, I hope?"

"Certainly," I assented.

"And you, no doubt, have the same reasonable pride, and hope that I will look my best?"

"To be sure I do."

"My Martha," he said, gladly, and he came to me, took my hands in his, and kissed me tenderly. "Now we are happy again. I tell you," he added, seriously, "your want of faith in me, Martha, will blast both our lives yet; you must—I say it solemnly, you must make up your mind to trust me explicitly—I mean, implicitly. It is agony to me to know that you are suspicious—that you believe you have cause for jealousy! Yes, it is agony!—and rather than endure it, I will leave all civilization—all that I hold dear—all, everything, and go to some desert isle, and there pass my days, solitary and alone, till death bids me come! I will, Martha, I will!"

He looked really grand as he stood before me, his face slightly flushed, eyes sparkling, head erect. Earnestness was written on every handsome feature; and his hands, though white and shapely as a wo-

man's, clenched as they now were, seemed to tell of the will and the power to endure any hardship—any privation.

How I loved him then! I arose, and placing my hands upon his shoulders, I looked fondly into his deep, dark eyes, and murmured proudly:

"My husband!"

A moment's sweet silence, and then I added:

"I will have faith in you, Augustus. I am, perhaps, too exacting; I should remember that I am old—"

"That will do," he interrupted, gently. "Never a word of that, if you please. You are my wife; I chose you before all others; whether you are old or young, beautiful or ugly, an houri or a gorgon, you are just as I would have you. If you deprecate yourself, you disparage my taste—don't you see?"

"Yes," I assented, and in a gush of tenderness I threw my arms about his neck, and kissed him again and again.

The breakfast bell sounded through the halls.

I started for the corner of the room where my comb was lying, my heart throbbing gladly as I rated myself as the happiest of women.

Augustus started for the door; half way there he paused, saying, lightly:

"By-the-way, Martha, just fill out a check for another hundred—will you?"

Sentiment vanished like a flash at that!

I indulged in a very unromantic sniff, as I muttered:

"H'm—money again?"

"Yes," he said, not at all abashed. "I'm going into town to-day, you see, to attend to old Margy—my nurse, you know."

"You changed your mind, last night," I said, ironically.

"Yes, man's privilege, you know, Martha. As I was saying, I am going into town, and I feel as if I would like to make my tailor a Christmas offering."

"That is unnecessary, it seems to me," I returned, in a tone of discouragement.

"Not at all, Martha dear. The offering I intend to make will consist in offering to pay him that bill that is credited to me. See?"

"Yes. It seems to me, Augustus, that your tailor bills—"

"Martha," he interrupted, reproachfully, "how can you demur at tailors, and their bills, when your heart—"

"They have nothing to do with the heart, Augustus; they affect the purse."

"Where true love reigns, Martha, neither heart-strings nor purse-strings are drawn tightly. However," with a magnificent gesture of indifference, "shut both heart and purse against me, if you will, and let me go to—"

"Breakfast, Martha," he added, as the second ringing of the bell warned us to hasten.

He hurried from the room, and I stooped to pick up my comb.

In doing so, my eyes fell upon my husband's dress coat, that was hanging on a chair in the corner.

A handkerchief was protruding from the pocket, a fine, hem-stitched handkerchief, unmistakably the property of a lady.

Angrily, I gained possession of it.

All my penitence and submission vanished; I forgot my promise to have faith, as I saw in one corner the name, delicately worked—"Inez."

CHAPTER VIII.

MY RIVALS.

"Inez!"

The word escaped my lips, sounding like a prolonged hiss.

The presence of that handkerchief in my husband's coat was positive proof to me that another rival had appeared upon the scene.

So two were pitted against me—Inez and Floy. How could I, Martha—unromantic, unpoetical Martha—hope to vanquish them?

I stood in a highly tragic attitude, holding that square of linen at arm's length, and looking at the name with horrified gaze.

"Inez!" I hissed again. "Who can she be? Ah!" That exclamation escaped me suddenly, as thoughts of my niece darted into my mind.

"'Tis she—I'm sure 'tis she!" I cried, triumphantly. "But stay—they have never met. But how do I know that? They may be old friends, for all I know. Well—well!" and I straightened myself up, and started forward like a soldier armed for the fray. "Well!"

That one word, to me, expressed my course of action in the campaign that was about to begin. Stratagem! that was to be my watchword.

I replaced the handkerchief in the pocket of the coat, and determined to say nothing about it.

Then I descended to breakfast.

This little episode banished from my mind all remembrance of the previous evening's occurrence, and I was thus enabled to meet Mrs. Pemberton's guests with the utmost *sang froid*.

Curious looks, amused looks, and scornful looks may have been leveled upon me; if so, I was blissfully ignorant of it; for of all the company only two did I heed—they were my husband and Floy.

What a beauty she was! Let me describe her; she was slightly above medium height, with a round and well-proportioned figure; her face was a long oval, with regular features, and a complexion perfect in pearly fairness; masses of golden hair waved back from the low, broad forehead; large, dreamy, blue eyes, and a mouth rosy red, with great possibilities of passion and power in its soft curves, completed the picture.

I looked at her, then at my husband, and I sighed—yes, I sighed audibly. How well they suited each

other! I tortured myself by thinking of the pride with which he would announce her as his wife; so different from the apologetic air with which he always presented me to any one.

There was perfect freedom—a delicious absence of restraint in these gatherings at Mrs. Pemberton's. The guests did very much as they pleased at all times. One by one they now left the breakfast table, till I found myself quite alone.

I sat sipping my coffee absently and sadly, when I heard a flutter of garments, and Mrs. Pemberton, like a perfume-laden breeze, was wafted towards me.

"Isn't she a beauty, Mrs. Ray?" she whispered, as she floated into a chair beside me. "Floy Haverhill, you know, I mean."

"Yes," I replied, curtly. "Tell me something about her, Mrs. Pemberton," I added. "Of course you know something."

"Of course I do. Well, to begin with, she is an heiress—an heiress and a beauty, and as all such are, the prey of fortune-hunters. She has lately returned from Europe; she was sent here by her 'stern parent,' who was forced to remain abroad with his invalid wife, her mother."

"Sent here, you say—and why?"

"To separate her from an admirer, from a man whom she favored, but whom her father could not tolerate. She came on with some friends; said friends are friends of mine—that explains how Floy happens to be here at present. They have been vested with authority over her, so that, in her pretty willfulness, she cannot throw herself away upon one unworthy. 'A spoiled darling,' I fancy she is."

"Without doubt," I assented. "But this lover of hers?"

"Oh, he is in Europe. She was sent away unbeknown to him—'torn ruthlessly from his arms,' as novelists would put it. He, poor fellow, is likely tearing his hair and beating his breast on the other continent; while she is flirting and laughing on this. Ah, well, so goes the world—so goes the world, Mrs. Ray—and what a delightful evening we'll have for the ball!"

"She's fickle," I mused, absently, my mind still intent upon Floy.

"A pickle, did you say?" asked Mrs. Pemberton. "Harrison, please pass the pickles."

I waived the question of pickles, and arose from the table.

Early in the forenoon, Augustus, the happy possessor of the other hundred—his Christmas present to his tailor—left Mott Haven.

"I'll be back in time to dress for the ball, Martha dear," were his last words to me.

I believe I would have followed him, to see how much truth there was in the story about old Margy, his nurse, if it had not been that I hesitated about deserting my present field, from which the enemy was in view.

I allowed him to depart in peace, while I remained behind to watch well for any move that would be the signal for the skirmish to begin.

The day passed, uneventful, save that when the time came to commence preparations for the evening's event, my husband was not on hand.

However, I arranged myself for the ball, putting forth my best endeavors to appear to advantage.

Maize-colored silk, flounces and frills of rich black lace, diamonds at neck, and ears and arms, and a glittering arrow fastened in the braids of my glossy brown hair, formed an elegant toilet; but, with the image of Floy in my mind, I could not contemplate myself with any satisfaction.

The mirror, which I consulted with a savage look, replied:

"Too short, too stout, too florid, too awkward."

I turned away impatiently, and consulted the clock on the mantel.

After nine o'clock! and Augustus not returned yet, and he so particular and fastidious about his toilet!

Could anything have happened to him? My heart stood still, and I felt myself growing pale, as that thought occurred to me. Had he met with some accident?

Had it not been for the presence of Floy in the house, I should have thought this was only another ruse to escape me for the evening; but as it was, I felt that he would return—"unless," I added, as the remembrance of the other one, Inez, came to me, "unless he is dancing attendance on her."

What should I do! My perplexity was great. Whether to rail at my husband, or to feel anxiety for him, was a question with me just then.

I did neither; I quietly endured the moments, hoping that each one, as it came, would bring him.

But, no; the clock struck ten, and still he had not appeared.

Strange qualms of mingled fear and anger depressed me. I threw myself upon a couch, determined that I would not enter the parlors without Augustus.

In that despondent mood, Mrs. Pemberton found me.

"Pshaw!" she exclaimed, as I stated to her one side of the matter—my anxiety for my husband's welfare. "Don't fret about him. And you must come down now—I insist upon it! Now do, dear Mrs. Ray—I mean, don't disappoint me, too! If I know that half a dozen of you are moping and fretting up stairs, how can I enjoy the evening? There's Floy, now—I'm so provoked about her that I could just cry," and there was a fluttering of ribbons and laces as she sank disconsolately into a chair.

"What about her?" I asked.

"Why, she—she on whom I have counted so much, she who would have been the beauty and the belle of the evening, she, at the very last moment, is positively taken ill, and cannot appear. Did you ever hear of anything so aggravating?"

"Ill, eh?" I mused, absently.

"Yes, ill!" she snapped, as if she had been done a personal injury. "And the ball will fall flat, I know."

She would have been such an attraction; a new face, you see, just from Europe, and so on. Why, I should have received notices in the papers but for this. It's too bad—really, too bad, and I'm all out of sorts about it. Now, if you refuse to appear, too, Mrs. Ray, I'll just turn every one out of doors, lock myself in my room, and have a good cry."

Her distress touched my heart, and I arose, saying that I would not disappoint her.

"That's a darling creature," she murmured, gratefully. "Now, just one moment, and I'll provide you with an escort. He's very nice—Mr. Filkins, you know. Between you and me," she added, confidentially, "I believe his mustache is— But I've spoken of that before; haven't I?"

And seeming to read an answer in the affirmative in my face, she floated away.

In another moment she had reappeared, and hurriedly, incoherently, she presented me to Mr. Filkins, who offered me his arm, and led me down to the parlors.

The lights, and the music, and the moving guests, and the laughter, was all a confused whirl to me.

I neither saw nor enjoyed; my thoughts were far away, traveling in the realm of speculation and conjecture, with the hope of finding some excuse for my husband's non-appearance.

Mr. Filkins did his best to entertain me, but I was in no mood to be entertained.

He spoke of the occasion, the assemblage, but to no avail; he failed to awaken responsive interest in my breast.

Then he attempted grave subjects—speaking of the death of this and that notability; still he was unsuccessful.

At last, he descended to gossip, and then his efforts were rewarded, for his first remark engaged all my wandering senses.

"Mr. Ray received rather an unpleasant surprise from his mother-in-law last evening. What a disagreeable old woman she must be!"

I was dumb.

He evidently had not recognized me, neither could he have heard my name at his introduction to me.

He saw that I was attentive, and he went on:

"I've heard something about infelicity in his domestic relations, and I don't wonder at it now. If that mother-in-law of his is around, I should think there would be perpetual war. You saw her, I suppose?"

"Yes," I said, faintly.

"She has the face of a shrew—has she not? Ugh! how ugly and venomous she looked as she burst in upon us! Wielding a broomstick, it strikes me, would be the most fitting attitude for her. Don't you think so?"

"I—I—can scarcely—hardly tell," I stammered, as I looked wildly around for some way of escape from this unpleasant portrayal of myself.

"He told me in confidence," pursued Mr. Filkins, "that she was the torment of his life, making his days one series of miseries. And, egad! she looks like one well calculated to do that. By-the-way, Mr. Ray is not here this evening. I saw him to-day—"

"Indeed!" I said, eagerly, anxious to hear more.

"Yes. I wonder if that was his wife who was with him?"

"A lady!" I exclaimed, faintly.

"To be sure—his wife wouldn't be a man! She was a charming creature—"

My heart sank like lead.

"Pretty, you say?" I managed to articulate.

"Beautiful! She was a small person, very dark, very slender, with an elegant figure, bright black eyes, and such a proud, patrician face! Egad! since seeing her, my heart hasn't felt just right. I had a good opportunity for observing her, for they were seated opposite to me in the horse-cars in the city."

"The other one," I moaned to myself. "It is the other one—Inez."

Saying that I felt faint, I turned abruptly from Mr. Filkins, and hurried toward one of the many doors that gave egress to the balcony surrounding the house. I felt that I must have air, or I would die!

I looked up as I neared the door, and I caught just one glimpse of a dark-robed, heavily cloaked figure flitting through it. For only one instant was it visible to me, but in that instant I had seen and recognized the golden hair of Floy Haverhill.

She had given out that she was ill—here she was stealing out of the house! Ah, ah!—this was the move that for me was the signal for the skirmish to begin!

Suspicion, jealousy were rampant again; and quickly catching up a cloak from a stand near me, I threw it over head and shoulders, and out into the winter night I went, and over the crisp, hard snow I followed that dark-robed, fleeing figure.

CHAPTER IX.

A LITTLE STRATAGEM.

WHAT my emotions were as I followed Floy it is impossible to describe.

It was with almost superhuman effort that I restrained myself from calling after her, and giving vent to my indignation.

The snow gave forth a crunching sound as I sped along over it; the moon, a slender crescent, peered down through the naked trees, giving only just sufficient light to enable me to make out the outlines of the figure ahead of me.

Where was she going? What was her errand?

That it was in some way connected with my husband I felt sure—his absence confirmed that idea.

But what could it be? And how was I to learn?

Though I knew not how it would advantage me, I still kept on behind her, keeping as much as possible in the shadow of the huge tree-trunks that lined both

sides of the avenue-like drive that led down to the end of the grounds.

Would I gain anything by this chase? I asked myself that question seriously as I began to be sensible of the cold, from which the cloak I had donned protected me insufficiently.

But I dismissed it as I saw dimly an object ahead, that told me that Floy's secret departure from the house meant something, though whether it affected me in any way or not I could not then determine.

The object was a carriage—a coach standing just without the grounds. I knew that it did not belong to any of the guests, from its situation.

"Ah!"

I half-crouched behind the trunk of a tree as I peered fiercely forth at the masculine form that I had discovered by the carriage door.

Was it—I stretched my neck to its greatest length, at the risk of breaking it, and also of being seen by him—was it? Ah, yes, it was! He turned as Floy reached him, and the light from the carriage-lantern flashed upon his face, and I saw it distinctly. Yes, it was my husband!

Oh, how I then battled with myself to keep my wrath in abeyance! I realized that I would gain nothing by stepping forth and proclaiming my presence. I remembered my watchword: "Stratagem!" and I resolved not to forget it for a moment.

He took her hands in his, and looked down into her upturned face.

Oh, I could have felled them both to the earth as they stood there thus!

Cautiously, stealthily I approached, till I reached the hedge that skirted the grounds.

"Let us hasten, Floy," he was saying. "The moments are precious."

"Oh, I tremble so," she returned. "Augustus, I feel—I fear that I cannot go on."

"My dear girl, I would not urge you, did I not know that it is for your happiness. You are miserable now—happiness is within your reach—grasp it! Life is not so long that we can stop to consider the world—that we can turn from what we know will yield us peace, because others will not sanction it. Come, be brave, and do not hesitate. You know I have only your interest at heart. Come! if we daily here, we may be discovered."

"But—"

"But what, Floy?"

"Suppose I should live to regret this rash step?"

"You never will. He who loves you so dearly will never fall you. Believe me, Floy."

"I will," she returned, resolutely. "I will believe you, Augustus. You have seen him as you expected?"

"Yes."

"And he understands all the arrangements so that there will be no delay?"

"Yes, perfectly."

"And I can be back in a few hours?"

"Yes; in two hours, Floy, you will be here again."

She laughed, a low, sweet, clear laugh.

"How nicely I have deluded them," she said, gleefully. "Poor Mrs. Pemberton is so distressed about my sudden illness. They all believe that I have taken a sleeping potion, and that I have locked my doors so as not to be disturbed. We could not have chosen a better opportunity—could we, Augustus?"

"No, indeed. Are you sure that no one saw you leave?"

"Oh, yes; sure—positive. I made my exit by the side door, and no one was in sight."

"I say, Floy, what about Mrs. Ray?"

"She still lives, sir. I caught a glimpse of her just as I reached the door. Mr. Filkins was playing the devoted."

"Poor Martha! She is reposing in the fond belief, I suppose, that I am bending over the death-bed of my old nurse, Margy."

That was more than human nature could endure.

I started up from my crouching posture, and they would have heard my voice in no gentle tone, had not Floy interrupted me.

"Oh, Augustus," she cried, in sudden alarm. "The key—the key of my room! I left it in the door! What shall I do—what shall I do?"

"Botheration!" was my husband's rather inelegant exclamation.

"And I say the same," she returned. "What shall I do? I cannot leave it there, for my absence will then be discovered. Oh, how could I have been so stupid!—so very, very stupid! I was in such anxious haste, you see, that I—"

"Yes," interrupted Augustus. "I understand all that. But without wasting any more time in discussion, let us try to determine upon what can be done. Plainly, there is nothing to do but to go back for it."

"But the risk," she wailed.

"Of course, it's risky, very risky; but to leave the key in the door is riskier still. Is it not?"

"Oh, yes—yes."

"Well, will you return for it, or shall I go?"

"Oh, you cannot go! Think, if your wife should see you! No, I must go, but oh, I fear, I tremble!"

"Fear and trembling won't help you now, Floy. Come, be brave, be bold, and go. Make haste—I beg of you, make haste, for if we are late we may not find him there."

With a low cry of despair she turned, and darted quickly back toward the house.

I remained in my hiding place for a moment, while I tried to think what I would do.

A sudden idea electrified me! I peered through the hedge, and saw that my husband was pacing restlessly to and fro; then I started up and stealthily followed in the steps of Floy.

Panting, breathless, from my exertions, and from fear that I would fail in the execution of my plan, I reached the house and entered.

Casting off the cloak I had borrowed, and taking one moment to compose myself in a measure, I made

my way to the parlors, and looked about anxiously, eagerly, for Mrs. Pemberton.

I saw her, and in less time than it takes to record it, I had reached her side.

My agitation did not seem amiss, as I said, breathlessly:

"At once—go at once to Floy Haverhill's room! I came by it a moment since, and I heard such moaning and groaning. She must be worse—"

Mrs. Pemberton did not wait to hear more; she sped from me like an arrow, and I walked slowly after, jubilant.

I reached the hall, and then I quickened my gait. I ran up the staircase, gained my room, and there I donned my fur-lined cloak, drawing the hood over my head as Floy had worn hers.

Cautiously, I made my exit. I passed the hall as I heard the sound of voices coming from the room that Floy occupied; then, chuckling with satisfaction at my success so far, I hastily descended, and left the house by the same side door.

Down the avenue I hurried, trembling in every limb. Would I succeed in my plan? If so, what triumph would be mine!

I reached the entrance-gate. With one hand I kept the hood of my cloak over my face, the other I held up warningly as Augustus sprang to me.

"I thought you would never come," he began.

I made a frantic gesture, warning him to be silent, and then I leaped into the carriage, giving him no chance of scanning either form or face.

He gave word to drive with all possible speed, and then he entered and closed the door.

I crouched over in one corner, strenuously endeavoring to compose myself.

We fairly flew over the ground, and the few remarks that Augustus ventured were drowned by the noise of the wheels upon the hard snow.

I made no effort to hear, no attempt to answer; I was too much engrossed with my own queries, which, summed up, amounted to—how will this adventure end?

CHAPTER X.

MY DEFEAT

DARK and lonely was the way.

What was to be our destination, I could not conjecture. I knew that it could not be at a very great distance from Mott Haven, since only two hours were to pass ere Floy would have been at home again.

We had been riding surely for half an hour, and I felt that the end must be at hand.

With each rod of the ride my trembling lessened, and my secret exultation increased. Soon—soon I would know what all this meant, and I would stand victorious before my young husband!

At last, lights appeared in the distance. We were evidently nearing some village.

I crouched further back into the corner of the carriage, and drew the hood more closely over my face, so that my identity would not be betrayed until the very last moment.

Augustus gave vent to an exclamation of satisfaction as we emerged from the darkness.

"Almost there, Floy," he said, gladly. "I hope we are in time."

He took out his watch, then putting his head out of the window, he ordered the driver to drive over to the nearest lamp.

My heart stood still as we came into the bright light, for if he should discover me now, I would not only lose my contemplated triumph, but I would still be in ignorance of the meaning of all this secrecy and intrigue.

I eyed him furtively as he consulted his watch.

"Half-past ten!" he exclaimed, as he looked up at me.

"Why, Floy, why do you wear—" A sudden stop, a moment's silence, and then, "Powers of Heaven!" burst from his lips.

What was it? Had he recognized me? How could he, since my face was all concealed? Ah, my hand—the hand that held my hood in place! He would know that, and the ring upon it? I had not thought of that.

He stared at me for a moment in blank dismay.

"Yes, he has recognized me," I said to myself, and I was just on the point of throwing back my hood, when he stayed me by exclaiming again, as he looked back at his watch:

"Powers of Heaven! Half-past ten! I fear we are too late."

Then excitedly he gave the word to drive like the wind, and to me he said:

"We may be in time, Floy."

And on we flew again.

Then he had not recognized me, after all! I was grateful for that; and I crouched into my corner again, satisfied, and perfectly assured that triumph would be mine. We turned from the lighted street into a darker by-way. We rode on for a few moments, and then Augustus ordered the driver to stop.

I was trembling again by this time—trembling with eagerness. Upon the threshold of what discovery was I standing?

Augustus alighted. I began to make preparations to follow, when he half-closed the door, as he said, hurriedly:

"One moment, Floy—just one moment. I'll go and see if he is here, and so save you both the trouble and embarrassment in case he has gone."

That did not suit me at all. How did I know that he would return? I did not fancy waiting in the lonely street, and probably giving him the opportunity of escaping; for it then seemed to me that he had recognized me, and this was a ruse of his by which to save himself.

I started forward, calling:

"Augustus—Augustus!"

But the closing of the door drowned my voice, and by the time I had succeeded in lowering the window, he was out of sight.

There was nothing to do but to wait, of course.

My exultation had received a severe shock by this, and I felt less assured of triumph. To tell the truth, the time, the place, the darkness, intimidated me so that triumph seemed of very little account. I felt that I would give it up willingly, if my husband would only return to me.

"Suppose he does not come—what shall I do then?" was a question that was perplexing me sorely, when, to my great relief, I heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

I was so positive that it was my husband, that as the person reached the carriage, and opened the door, I, without stopping to look at him, stretched forth my hands in glad welcome.

He leaped in, closed the door, we started on the return, and then he turned to me and took my extended hands in his.

We had emerged into the light again, and then I saw his face. And, oh—oh—how can I tell it?—how can I describe the emotions that ran riot within me as I saw his face—saw that it was not my husband, but that very same stranger whom I had confronted before in a way something similar to this.

I drew my hands from his, pulled the hood over my face, and crouched back into my corner.

Oh, this was terrible! What could I do—what could I do?

Wild ideas of leaping from the swiftly speeding vehicle—of thrusting him out so quickly and forcibly that he would have no power to resist, flashed through my mind.

It is possible that I would have put one or the other into instant execution, had I not made the discovery that my companion was apparently unconscious of my agitation; for he sat smiling serenely as he drew on his gloves.

That gave me hope!

It was evident that he was the person to whom Floy and Augustus had referred in their conversation; it was also evident that the night's adventure was to result in a meeting between him and Floy. From his demeanor I judged that he believed me to be Floy; now, if I could keep him in that belief till we reached Mrs. Pemberton's, I might then escape, and save myself from recognition.

To the accomplishment of that idea I bent all my energies.

"There!" he said, in a satisfied tone, as the last glove was fastened. "Now I can proceed to business," and he turned to me.

By this time we were out of the lighted street, rolling along the dark and lonely road again.

"To proceed to business," he repeated, in a calm, matter-of-fact tone. "In the first place, Miss Floy, I have to thank you for the unlimited confidence you seem to repose in me. Were I an old friend you could not trust me more than you have done. I feel highly honored, and hope to merit your favor."

I bowed, not thinking that, in the darkness, the gesture was lost.

"It is to be regretted," he continued, "that friends and busybodies keep such strict vigil over you and your actions, that you are forced to have recourse to such artifice as enables you to see me to-night, when you desire to carry out any little plan of your own. It is to be regretted, I say—but all this is neither here nor there—is it?"

I shook my head for reply, again forgetful that it could not be seen.

"Now, Miss Floy," he went on, in a slow, musing tone, "while I esteem you for your philanthropic ideas—your desire to do good—to devote your life and your wealth to the advancement of public charities—"

"Oh, what a fool I've been!" I groaned, in the privacy of my hood, as I began to understand how needlessly I had placed myself in so embarrassing a position.

"You made a remark, Miss Floy—I didn't quite catch it. May I ask you to repeat it?"

I depended upon the noise of the carriage wheels to hide any difference in voice, so I ventured to reply:

"I simply said that I agreed with you."

"Agreed with me, Miss Floy! In what, if you please?"

"Why, in that which you have been saying."

"But I have said nothing—at least, I have made no assertion. I fear you have not heard me, Miss Floy. Shall I begin all over again?"

"Oh, no—no!"

"Very well. To go on: I believe I stopped at the word charities—now, Miss Floy, have you ever considered that word in the fullest, broadest meaning? Have you ever—"

"No, I haven't!" I cried, impatiently, feeling that I could put either of my wild ideas into execution rather than endure this longer.

"Very well. We will discuss that point to-night then. In order to do that thoroughly, we will go back to the beginning of language, and step by step we will proceed till we come to—"

"Mrs. Pemberton's at last!" I cried, gladly, as I caught a glimpse of the lighted mansion in the distance. "Thank God!"

I thought of nothing beyond escaping from my present position; that discovery of the truth might come about afterward, did not occur to me; to get away now without being recognized was all my desire.

"Now, Miss Floy, if you will tell me what you think—"

"I think," I said, hurriedly, "that you had better leave me here, and allow me to go the rest of the way alone."

"Oh, no, madame—I mean, miss, I could not think of it."

"But, I insist."

"I am inflexible. I will not leave you till I have seen you safely into the house."

"But, consider—"

"I have considered, and I repeat, I am inflexible. In the discharge of my duties, I am inflexible."

I could have throttled him then, in my impatience and vexation.

Every moment we were nearing the house, and if he remained to assist me from the carriage, I was lost!

But how could I escape from him? Should I leap out?—or should I eject him?

I realized that the former would be the more efficacious, and I determined to do it, although I knew that, at the rapid rate we were going, it might endanger life and limb.

I half arose to act on my intention; I reached forth my hand to open the door, when—

The carriage came to a sudden stop, and I was thrown forward upon the front seat.

Before I could extricate myself from my awkward position, my companion had leaped out and was endeavoring to assist me.

Between my desire to keep my cloak about my form, my hood over my face, and to ward off his assistance, I was perfectly powerless to help myself. The consequence was that I was fairly dragged from the carriage; and when at last, after much panting and many frantic exertions, I was once more upon terra firma, I found myself face to face with the stranger.

I saw that he appeared not at all surprised; then, before a word could be said, I turned from him and hurried into the grounds.

I heard a quiet laugh behind me: that, and the absence of surprise upon seeing me, suggested that he had known my identity all during the ride, and that in this way he had aided Augustus in escaping from me.

Ah, how differently did I return to the house from the manner in which I had left it? Then, triumph had seemed within my reach; now, defeat, ignominious defeat stared me in the face!

Reluctantly, I approached the house. If it had been possible I should have remained in the grounds all night and gone to my own home in the morning; but of course that was out of the question.

I entered—or rather I stole in. The coast was clear before me, for which I was heartily thankful. I darted to the staircase, and in a few moments I had gained my room.

Once there, I locked myself in and indulged in the luxury of giving vent to my feelings, which I did by flinging my cloak upon the floor, planting myself before the mirror, and glaring at my image savagely, as I exclaimed:

"Martha Ray, you've been a fool!—a perfect fool!"

What next?

I asked the question despairingly.

Could I remain in my own room?

No.

Must I descend to the parlors?

Yes.

Perhaps my absence had not been noticed.

With that hope in my heart, I smoothed my ruffled toilet and went down.

The first person I met was Mrs. Pemberton, bright and beaming.

"The ball is a success," she whispered, gleefully—"a decided success! And I shall have notices in at least three of the papers! I'm so delighted that I scarcely know where I am. That dear, darling Floy consented to get better, and—There she is! Look at her. Did you ever see anything so lovely?"

I looked over to Floy. Ah, yes, lovely, very lovely, she was. I saw her laughing and talking gaily, and I muttered, bitterly:

"Public charities, indeed! She looks like one who would devote life and wealth to public charities! Bah; what a fool I have been!"

Mrs. Pemberton floated away, and mentally I blessed her enthusiasm, that had saved me from being questioned about my absence.

Then, for the first time, the thought occurred to me!

Where is Augustus?

Scarcely had it found expression, when, lifting my eyes, I beheld my husband approaching.

Faultlessly dressed; handsome and smiling, I saw him; not the shadow of anxiety—not a shade of embarrassment, was visible upon his face. And I—what had I not endured, and all for him!

He came to me, and eying me almost pityingly, he asked:

"Martha, where have you been?"

"Where have you been?" I retorted, fiercely.

Bending to me, he whispered:

"Let one question cancel the other, Martha. Better so! eh?"

I realized to the full that an explanation would only result in my own humiliation, so I placed my hand in his, and we were quits.

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE RIVER.

It was the day after the ball, and a skating-party was on the tapis.

I was standing before the glass, making strenuous exertions to fix my seal-skin cap at a jaunty angle—but in vain.

Either the cap was too small, or my head was too large; it would not look like Floy's, try as I would.

I became very red in the face from my endeavors, which did not tend to enhance my beauty in the least; impatience at that, together with the remembrance of the previous evening's adventure, made me uncomfortably irritable.

I looked over at Augustus, who was dutifully waiting for me.

He was seated by a window, rocking to and fro on his chair; his thumbs were thrust in his vest pockets, and he was twisting an unlighted cigar between his teeth, and humming lightly a gay tune; the very picture of contentment and peace.

Somehow the sight irritated me more, and I broke out, sharply:

"Augustus, you'll go with me to-day."

"My dear," he returned, suavely, "such has been, and still is my firm intention."

"Oh."

That was all I could say, for I was rather taken aback at his ready acquiescence.

"Are you ready, dear?" he asked, gently.

"Yes, love," I snapped, as I gave a final jerk to my rebellious cap.

"Then come."

And we descended to the drawing-room, where the skaters were to assemble.

There was Floy, looking unusually lovely in her short skirt and *pelisse* of black velvet trimmed with dark fur, a fur cap on her golden hair, and her face so bright, so radiant, as she participated in the gay chatter that was bandied from one to another.

I looked at her, and then I fixed my eyes upon Augustus, determined that he should not only attend me, but that he should not leave my side for a moment.

He went over to one of the large windows that faced the street in front of the house. I followed, and stood at a little distance from him, and gazed out upon the snow-covered ground.

"Ye Gods! There she is!"

That enthusiastic exclamation caused me to look away from the slowly approaching sleigh that I had been watching, and to turn toward the speaker; it was Mr. Filkins, who was standing by Augustus at the window.

I saw that both were intently gazing at that very sleigh. It was now passing by the house, and the occupants could be distinctly distinguished.

I saw that one was young, and darkly beautiful; the other rather old and lean and prim. I can describe the difference between them in no better way than by saying that the former was all curves, and graceful motions, while the latter was all angles, and stiff, awkward motions.

"I saw you yesterday, you know, Ray—thought then she might be your wife. Who is she?"

Ah, ha! That remark of Mr. Filkins gave me an idea who this dusky beauty was; my other rival, Inez.

But my attention was diverted from her, as I heard my husband whispering:

"Hush! for heaven's sake, hush!"

I looked at him, and saw that he was nudging Mr. Filkins in the ribs, and casting warning glances over one shoulder toward me.

"What is it?" asked Filkins, innocently.

"Don't speak so loud; it isn't always safe, you know."

"Oh," and looking slowly about him, his eyes rested upon me.

A gleam of mirth lit up his rather fine face as he bent toward Augustus, and whispered, but not cautiously enough:

"Oh, I see it's the mother-in-law, eh?"

"No," growled Augustus, "it's my wife."

"Gracious powers! Your wife! Why, Ray—why, man," as he darted quick, uneasy glances at me; "you said that it was—"

"I'm not responsible for what I have said, Filkins. I'm subject to momentary aberration of the mind, and in—"

"But—but, my dear fellow," stammered Mr. Filkins, in a tone of distress; "I've insulted her! I spoke to her last night about your mother-in-law; I did not recognize her then, and I didn't know she was your wife. What a terrible mistake I have made! Let me run—let me hide! If I were a woman, I believe I would faint at this very critical moment."

"There—there," said Augustus, calmly; "don't fret. My wife is the soul of amiability, and she will forgive you. Come, let me present you."

"Oh, no, not for the world!"

"Come—come," insisted Augustus, taking him by the arm, and forcing him forward. "Martha," he said to me, and, of course, there was no retreat for Filkins then.

With a sickly smile upon his pale face, he began bowing and muttering something about the felicity of meeting me, before Augustus had had time to utter a word.

"Now," my husband whispered, as he slapped him reassuringly on the back, "now is your time. She'll forgive you."

He stepped to one side, and Mr. Filkins began making profuse apologies, the nature of which I could only imagine, for his words, from embarrassment and rapidity of utterance, were incomprehensible.

Very well, so far; but Mr. Filkins seemed determined to make amends for his *faux pas* by devoting himself assiduously to me. He would not leave me, and I, without being rude, could not leave him.

I tried to catch my husband's eye, to warn him to come for me, but he, blissfully unconscious of my glances, stood looking serenely out of the window.

To add to my irritation, Mr. Filkins took my skates, and with his most winning smile, said:

"You will allow me, I am sure—pray do, Mrs. Ray."

I looked despairingly toward Augustus, but to no avail; and before I could reply, Mr. Filkins had placed my hand upon his arm, and was leading me forth.

I was boiling with rage, my face was flaming, I knew; still, I had to smile, and appear pleased.

Augustus shook his finger at me in playful remonstrance as I looked back at him. The next moment I saw him walking gaily along with Floy on his arm.

Of course, I could not blame my husband for this, but all the same it angered me towards him, for I felt that he was mentally blessing Mr. Filkins for relieving him of my company.

A brisk walk brought us to the river. Many were there before us—people from the surrounding houses.

By that time I had become quite resigned to my fate; I realized that it was useless to rebel, and I passively submitted to Mr. Filkins' attentions.

He fastened on my skates, he started out with me, and he fell down with me; for, to speak frankly, I was less steady on my skates than on anything else, and he, being but a feather weight in comparison to myself, was very naturally compelled to fall when I did.

I think that rather dampened his chivalric desire to make amends for his mistake; for, shortly after, he left me.

He had conducted me to one of the impromptu seats that had been set in among the tree-trunks along the shore, and there I sat, panting from my exertions, and looking about for Augustus.

I saw him at a little distance from me, but I heard his voice quite plainly, for the wind favored me.

I turned quickly aside, as I heard the following:

"Why will old and clumsy women venture on skates? None but the most graceful can succeed in making any sort of an appearance on the ice. That rather old party, yonder, on the bench, has cut the most ridiculous figure I've seen in many a day."

"Do you think so?"

"I do. Did you see her fall? And that unlucky fellow who went down with her? He deserved his fate for venturing out with one so clumsy and awkward, eh?"

"You're a little sharp, ain't you?"

"What will you wager, now, that she doesn't think she's the most graceful person present? Come, now."

"No, thanks. You see, I know her."

"Ah, indeed!"

"Yes. By-the-way, don't you want me to present you?"

"Who is she?"

"My wife."

"Jupiter! Your wife! And I have been making fun of her!"

I dared to look then, and I saw a masculine form darting like an arrow from Augustus, who was standing still, laughing heartily.

Was that proper? I put the question to all who may read these lines: Was that proper? Should he not have annihilated him on the spot?

I started up to go to him; at the same instant a woman shot swiftly, gracefully by me, and before I had succeeded in moving an inch she had reached Augustus.

I had seen her face—it was the dusky beauty, Inez. Just then it occurred to me:

"Is she my niece?"

I saw them greet each other gladly. I drew near, and soon I was able to hear their words.

"Who is that golden-haired beauty yonder, in velvet and furs?" she was asking, eagerly.

"Miss Florence Haverhill. Why?"

"Oh, nothing in particular. And who is her cavalier, who is so devoted that he cannot leave her side for a moment?"

I glanced over toward Floy, and I recognized her cavalier at once, spite of his evident desire to conceal his face by causing cap and coat-collar to meet; it was that stranger.

"I wonder if they are discussing 'public charities,' now?" I queried.

Augustus replied hesitatingly to Inez' question:

"He—oh, he is a stranger."

"That may be; but you know his name."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Why will you not tell me? Is there any reason for this caution? However, if you won't tell me, I'll tell you," and she whispered in his ear.

Augustus started, as he asked:

"You know him?"

She laughed, a bitter, scornful laugh it seemed to me; then gaily she replied:

"I'll answer you by using your own words: 'Are you sure?'"

Then she turned away. I saw her face, so darkly beautiful, now pale and disturbed as from some violent emotion.

She passed me slowly, with head bowed, and I heard her mutter:

"Is it for this that I have waited so long?—to find that he is another's! Ah, no! I am no patient creature, to endure passively. I say it shall not continue!—it shall not!"

She passed away from my hearing, and I stood looking after her.

Did her words refer to Augustus? Was she an old love of his? Was I in any danger from her?

These queries flashed through my mind; then I turned to go to Augustus; but he had disappeared.

I could not see him anywhere, but I saw Inez, looking so piquant and natty in her skirts of red and black and her velvet cap with a scarlet wing in it.

"I wonder if she is my niece?" I asked myself.

"Happy thought—I'll speak to her."

I started out boldly, but, alas, for the uncertainty of skates!—the next moment I was precipitated full length upon the ice, I scrambled to my feet, but after several very frantic endeavors to regain my equilibrium, I was down again; and down I remained, while I wiped the snow from my face, and adjusted the cap that had lurched forward on to my nose.

When I at last was upon my feet—to accomplish which *feat* I had been obliged to divest myself of my skates—Inez, my probable niece, was lost to sight.

With a deep sigh, I slowly, sadly made my way back to the bench; and there I sat, entirely out of conceit with myself, and waited patiently for Augustus to appear.

A feeling of lassitude came over me; my eyes were closing; objects became dim and shadowy, and I had fallen asleep.

I awoke with a sudden start, and looked wildly about me.

Where was I? I soon comprehended; on the bench by the river, and all alone!

The early dusk had come, and not a person in sight!

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE SNOW.

I WAS shivering from head to foot, but the chill of desolation that settled upon my heart as I looked about upon the scene of ice and snow, and naked trees, so dreary now that sunlight, and gay toilets, and merry skaters were gone, was greater still.

How had this come about?

What did this desertion mean?

Had I been so screened by the trees that Augustus could not see me?

"What matters it to him," I cried, bitterly, "that I am left alone—out in the cold? No doubt he has seen me here asleep, and he allowed me to remain, glad to be from me a while longer. Ah, Augustus—Augustus, there'll be a long and terrible account for you to answer some day. Then I will—"

But I came to a sudden stop, as loud, impatient voices fell on my ear.

"I tell you, Filkins, it's all your fault! You started out as her escort, and it was your duty to see her home."

"I'm sure I never thought of her, Ray. Of course, I expected that you, her husband, would be sufficiently interested to look after her."

"But I had such unlimited confidence in you, Filkins. I didn't suppose you would desert her like this."

"See here, Augustus Ray, please understand this: I offered to conduct your wife to the river; I didn't make any agreement to burden myself with her for the rest of my natural life. She's big enough to take care of herself, isn't she? Doesn't she know the way home?"

"But that isn't the point, Filkins—it isn't the point at all! It isn't showing her proper respect, to allow her to go alone—"

"Well, I'm not to blame. I'll help you in your search for her, but I don't care to have all the responsibility of her disappearance put upon my shoulders. But why, in the name of reason, why did you not enlist the whole household in the hunt?"

"I'll tell you, Filkins, but never repeat it; my wife sleeps! Of course, that's nothing remarkable, but I mean that she often sleeps when she shouldn't. It has occurred to me that her non-appearance might be due to the indulgence of this habit; in such a case, I would rather not apprise the whole world of the fact. It will sound better, you see, to say that we found her half-drowned, or altogether drowned, or anything thrilling or startling, than to have all at the house discover her snoring upon the ice."

I didn't wait to hear more. Could I remain and allow them to find me, and to be forced to acknowledge the humiliating fact that I had fallen asleep? No.

I agreed with Augustus on that point; I would far rather they would find me half-drowned than snoring. Why, were it known, it would be a standing jest for years to come! Oh, no—no, I must evade them!

I peered cautiously around the tree-trunk in the direction from which the voices had proceeded. As I looked they came in sight. One moment's terrible suspense was mine as I waited for their next move; to my great relief, to my joy, they turned their backs to me, and walked quickly on.

That was my opportunity. I seized it eagerly. I ran with all possible speed in the opposite direction, careless where I went so that I got away from them.

I dared not look back for fear that I should see that they had spied me. On—on, I ran, panting and breathless, till I was forced to stop from sheer exhaustion.

Then, supporting myself against a tree, I looked around about me, with the hope of seeing some landmark that would give me an idea as to where I was.

Ah! I started gladly as, in the distance, I descried the cupola that topped Mrs. Pemberton's mansion; and judging from the direction in which I had been fleeing, I concluded that I must be at the left, or in front of the house.

Now I dared to advance; and on the way I pondered deeply, trying to think what excuse I could offer for my absence; for never—never would I admit that I had fallen asleep.

In deep and serious thought I walked slowly along. No possible excuse presented itself to me, and, in despair, I, at last, looked up and about me, as the words fell from my lips:

"What shall I do?"

The next moment I had darted behind a tree, where I stood trembling, and holding my skirts as closely about me as possible; for, not far ahead, I had seen two forms—Floy and the stranger.

"Oh, if they should see me now!" I groaned to myself. "Better—far better would it have been if I had allowed Augustus to find me. Better to have confessed to that unromantic sleep, than to stand, humiliated, before that stranger again!"

I could hear the murmur of their voices, but their words were not distinguishable.

I dared not peer around at them, for fear of detection; so I stood there, trembling and shivering, for hours it seemed to me, though in reality it was only for a few moments.

The murmur of voices ceased.

At last, I ventured to look.

Thank God, they were gone!

I could not see him, but I saw Floy hurrying on in the direction of the house.

I stepped out from my hiding place, but instantly I darted back again, as the small, sylph-like form of Inez appeared in the path, and hurried on also in the direction of the house.

She had appeared as suddenly as a harlequin through a stage trap. Where had she been? Had she seen me? Where was she going?

These queries disturbed me so that I stood behind the tree for full fifteen minutes, lost in thought.

At last the deepening dusk warned me to go on, which I did, slowly, keeping my eyes fixed upon the footprints in the snow, as I tried again to fabricate some excuse for my absence.

Was it a shadow that fell across my way?

I aroused myself from my abstraction, and looked again.

A shadow? No; it was a form.

I stooped, and peered excitedly, timidly at it.

Great Heavens! It was Floy.

She was lying motionless, a skate tightly clasped in one little hand, a cruel wound on her white forehead, from which the blood slowly trickled and dripped—dripped upon the snow.

She looked as if she were dead; the white of her eyes shone between her eyelids; her lips, pale and drawn, disclosed the brilliant enamel of her teeth.

I laid my hand upon her heart; the pulsations were scarcely perceptible.

What should I do?

I looked up wildly as I knelt beside her.

"Thank God!" I exclaimed, as I saw forms appearing from a distance.

CHAPTER XIII.

A TERRIBLE MISTAKE.

THE moments were full of solemnity to me, as I looked upon the ghastly, upturned face of Floy, and waited anxiously for the coming of the distant forms.

I forgot, for the time, that she was my rival; I only thought of her as I saw her—a woman wounded, perhaps to the death.

I had no opportunity to conjecture how this had happened—to wonder if it were a self-inflicted injury, as the skate, so tightly grasped, seemed to suggest, or if it were a blow from another's hand.

A form came dashing toward me.

I looked up—it was my husband!

He stopped short as he caught sight of the figure in the snow, and a sharp, tense exclamation escaped him.

The words I had been about to utter froze upon my lips as I saw his face full of horror, as he gazed, not upon Floy, but upon me.

Not a word, only that look of horror, and beneath it I shrank, appalled, for it suggested to me terrible things, the substance of which was as follows:

Would it not seem as if I had been Floy's assailant? She evidently had not gone home with the party, neither had I; would it not seem as if I had followed her, now that I was found beside her? Would I not be accused, at least in my husband's heart, of having raised my hand against her?

These thoughts, coming upon me suddenly, overwhelmed me entirely, and I cowered away from Augustus as if I had indeed been guilty.

"Oh, Martha!" came like a groan from his lips.

"I don't think it is dangerous," I said, timidly. "But she should be attended to."

"Yes. Here come the others. We were searching for you, Martha. I never thought to find you like this."

"There's nothing the matter with me, Augustus," I said, stupidly.

"So I see. But she—she is hurt. How did this happen, Martha?"

"I do not know."

"You do not know?" in a reproving tone.

"So I have said."

"Can I believe you, Martha?" he asked, solemnly.

"This is no time for conundrums, Augustus," I said, impatiently.

Further words were prevented by the arrival of the others upon the scene.

All started with horror upon beholding the unexpected sight, and sympathy for the beautiful Floy ran high.

I was plying with questions, of course; my answers partook of the monotonous, I fear, for they invariably were:

"I do not know."

I could not enter into any attempt at explanation; I would not confess to them all how I had happened to come that way; I could only reply: "I do not know," and that not very heartily, for I stood by, trembling and timid as a whipped child, as I met my husband's strange, stern gaze.

Talk was brisk, and surmises were many, as Floy was lifted from the ground, and borne along in the arms of my husband and Mr. Filkins.

The rest of the gentlemen fell in train, and I brought up the rear, mentally anathematizing myself for having allowed sleep to overpower me, and also for having fled from Augustus, when if I had met him bravely, I should not have stumbled into so prominent a position in this decidedly unpleasant and embarrassing state of affairs.

A mournful cavalcade it was, truly.

As we reached the Pemberton mansion, I caught glimpses of eager faces at the window—they were probably on the lookout for Augustus, triumphantly leading home his truant wife; but eagerness gave way to weeping and wailing, as they beheld a far different picture.

Of course I was supposed to know all about it, and I was catechized and interviewed till I felt as if I were losing my senses.

At the first opportunity, I escaped to my room, and there I paced wildly to and fro, with the hope of getting rid of some of my surplus emotion.

What a day that had been! Vexations—nothing but vexations from the start! And Augustus was the root of all—and to think that now he should look and act so strangely toward me, as if I were a culprit!

My indignation at that ran high; it actually forced me to sputter, as if I were choking.

I found that I was only lashing myself into a more furious state by my meditations, so I left the solitude of my room and sought the company of the guests, where I could better put a check upon my feelings.

Then fell upon the house a sudden gloom.

Festivities were postponed while the fate of the favorite, Floy, was trembling in the balance.

There was no more "sound of revelry by night;" we sat together in hushed and solemn conclave as we discussed the probabilities of the catastrophe.

Word from the sick-room was eagerly seized and distributed.

"Floy was not in any danger, though still unconscious," was the unvarying report during the evening. Augustus wandered about like an uneasy spirit; he, who was always the life of the assemblage, was now silent and stern.

His demeanor—every look that he levelled upon me, was a reproach to me.

I endured till endurance was no longer possible, then I arose and followed him as he ascended the staircase, determined to have a plain talk with him.

I saw him enter our room, but when I reached it and opened the door he was not visible.

"Augustus, where are you?" I called.

"Lost in the mazy windings of thought—in the labyrinth of conjecture," came in a lazy drawl from the deep hollow of the easy-chair that was drawn up before the fire.

"Do you find it profitable employment?" I asked, quietly, as I advanced to him.

"No. It's a dead waste of—of, may I say brains?"

"You may say what you choose. I suppose the object of your search was—"

"Yes, it was," as I hesitated; then, nodding in the direction of Floy's room, he added: "The solution of this mystery."

A moment's silence; then he started up abruptly, thrust his hands deep down into his pockets, and stationed himself right before me, as one who had made up his mind to a great undertaking.

"Martha," he began, sternly, "where were you this afternoon?"

"Out," I replied, grimly.

"Where were you, I asked. 'Out' is a very comprehensive term."

"Just so. It gives you a wide range from which to choose; for I intend that you shall settle the matter for yourself without any aid or information from me."

"Why, Martha!" he exclaimed, evidently much taken aback—he had probably expected a repetition of the other morning's submission from me. "Why—why, Martha! Do you mean that—that you refuse to—"

"Exactly," I said, tartly, moving closer to him, and as he stepped back, I stepped with him, till I had, not literally, but actually driven him into a corner, while I spoke:

"Exactly, I do refuse! You neglect me as you do—leave me to get home as best I can—and then you expect me to render to you an account of my comings and goings! No, sir—never, sir!"

"I'm sure it was by the purest accident that I—that you—I mean, that we overlooked you this afternoon. I thought—"

"You had no business to think, Augustus Ray! The trouble is, you were too willing to think—"

"Now, Martha!"

"Yes, you were too willing to think that I was disposed of in some—"

"Oh, Martha!"

"So that you could play the gallant to some fair damsel—"

"Martha—Martha, have a care!"

"And now you stand up before me, as if you were my judge, and demand of me: 'Where have you been?'"

"A terrible fear caused me to ask you that question, Martha."

"I understand you, Augustus. And I suppose it is that same terrible fear that has caused you to—to—"

"Yes, it is—to speak frankly, it is. It looked badly, you see, Martha. You were missing—Floy was absent—I found you together. What could I think?"

"I refuse to answer riddles, Augustus."

"If I have wronged you, Martha—"

"If you have wronged me!" I cried, hotly. "If you have! Augustus Ray, if there is one lingering doubt in your mind—if the faintest suspicion lurks there that I have raised my hand against another, let us part now and forever! If you can do me so foul an injustice as to think—to think—"

I broke down utterly then, frightened at my own words. If he should leave me, how could I live? The bare thought of parting was agony to me. Unable to proceed, I stood trembling before him.

"It puzzles me, Martha," he said, calmly, "how my thinking can be doing you a foul injustice. Would you have me go through life with never a thought in my mind?"

"You know what I mean, Augustus."

"No, I can't say that I do."

"You are wilfully obtuse."

"And, my dear, I fear you are deaf," he interrupted. "Some one is knocking at the door. Do you not hear?"

No, I had not heard. I hastened to answer it. Mrs. Pemberton stood there, who wanted to see me, "for just one moment," to show me the notices she had

received in the papers. Would I go with her to her room?

I went, and listened patiently to her volubility for as much as half an hour, then I made my way back to my room, wondering how I should find Augustus.

To my surprise, I found him reclining in the large chair before the fire, and sleeping sweetly. How handsome he looked—his attitude all grace, his proud head resting against the rich, red velvet of the chair, his white and shapely hands clasped above it.

I gazed upon him for a moment, thinking deeply the while; then a tide of tenderness swept over my heart, obliterating all bitterness, and I stooped to kiss him, when a sharp rap on the door startled me.

I answered it.

This time Harrison confronted me, a note in one hand.

I offered to take it, but he looked beyond me into the room, saying:

"It's for Mr. Ray, ma'am—for Mr. Ray, particular."

"You see that he is asleep," I said, as I pointed to the chair. "I will take it."

He scratched his head reflectively, then hesitatingly he spoke:

"The order was, ma'am, by the man who just brought it, that it was to be given to nobody but Mr. Ray himself."

That was enough to arouse all my suspicions.

Lowering my voice, as I now desired not to disturb my husband's slumbers, I said, emphatically:

"You can do nothing but give it to me. I will awaken Mr. Ray."

I held out my hand for it.

Reluctantly it was given to me.

"There's an answer wanted, ma'am."

"Very well. Wait here, and I'll—"

I did not finish my sentence, but closed the door in his face.

On tiptoe I stole to the center-table, and by the light from the chandelier above it, I examined the missive—it was addressed to Augustus, in pencil; the handwriting seemed rather masculine than feminine, and it bore evidence of haste.

Casting a furtive glance at my husband, and seeing that he was still fast locked in slumber, I took up a pair of scissors and cautiously cut the envelope at one end. If it had not been for my anxious fears that Augustus would awaken, I might have seen that I had cut two envelopes instead of one, and then I should have known that which I learned some time after—that the envelope addressed to Augustus was only a cover to one addressed to Florence Haverhill.

But, all unconscious, I drew out the slip of paper therein contained, and read the hastily penciled words:

"DARLING: What means this delay? I am beset with torturing fears. Is all known?—or, is it only that you cannot succeed in escaping from the house? Write a few words, if possible, to

"ONE WHO LOVES YOU DEARLY."

My resolution was formed in an instant. Passing my husband swiftly and silently, I consigned the note and envelopes—as I believed, envelope—to the flames.

Fairly panting with suppressed indignation, I then seated myself at the table, and dashed off the following words:

"All is known—your 'darling' will see you no more. ONE HAVING AUTHORITY."

Hastily sealing it, I tip-toed to the door, and opening it just enough to give passage to my hand, I gave the note to Harrison.

He hurried down to the hall, and I leaned over the baluster and saw him hand the missive to a man in waiting there.

Then I returned to the room, and seated myself opposite to my sleeping husband, smiling with satisfaction.

Little did I think that I had made a terrible mistake; that I had by this act, prompted by jealousy and suspicion, not only marred the happiness of others, but had also sown the seeds of much misery to myself.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BOOK AGENT.

It was the forenoon of the following day.

I was passing through the hall, meditating deeply upon a fact that to me seemed surprising; it was: when Augustus had awakened on the previous evening not a sign had he made as would be expected from a man who had failed to keep tryst with a fair one.

I had been fully prepared for any exhibition of dismay, for any excuse of his to leave me even at that hour; and I was rather disappointed that he had said nothing, and had been not at all disturbed.

I argued to myself in this wise: he has either forgotten the projected meeting altogether, or else, knowing that he had slept too long to be able to keep his appointment, he is thus calm so as not to arouse my suspicions. On this morning I was pursuing the same line of thought, and in conclusion I said, half-aloud:

"That must be it. However, there'll be no more of it. I have settled that matter, I believe; I have nothing further to fear from that quarter."

"Why, Mrs. Ray, what do you mean?" I heard in astonished tones, and then I became aware that Mrs. Pemberton was standing in front of me, her hands upon my shoulders, her face peering into mine.

I looked at her wonderingly.

"You!" I exclaimed, falteringly.

"Yes, it is I, Mrs. Pemberton. And I have been talking to you about Floy, and you have answered me in the most incomprehensible way."

"Have I?" I asked, confusedly.

"Yes, you have."

"Yes, I'm sure—"

"So am I," she interrupted, briskly. "I'm sure that you are fearfully and wonderfully *distract*. Now, what has happened to you?"

"Nothing—nothing," I replied, rousing myself from my partial stupor. "You say you were talking about Floy—what about her?"

"She has passed from unconsciousness to delirium."

"And she raves?"

"Yes."

"About what?"

"Love. She calls Heaven to witness her dying devotion, and so on."

"To whom—devotion to whom?" I demanded.

"Ah, that's the question. But don't allow this to affect your spirits, Mrs. Ray. I'm doing my best to be cheerful, and to cheer the rest. Of course Floy is ill—very ill, but not dangerously so, and we need not suspend pleasure altogether. I have been in despair this morning; everybody seems so gloomy, so glum—half-a-dozen spoke of going home, and I have racked my brains in vain trying to think of some diversion that would not be *outré* under the circumstances. Then the door-bell rang, and Harrison admitted a female—and such a female!"

"Indeed?" I said, interrogatively, trying hard to appear interested.

"Yes. She's an antediluvian relic—nothing less antique than that."

"Indeed!"

I varied my remark by uttering it in a falling inflection.

"Yes. She has come in the modern capacity of a book-agent, however. The instant I saw her I felt that my prayer was answered; here was amusement for the forenoon at least. So, with the greatest *empathy*, I ushered her into the drawing-room, and I am now on my way to report her arrival. She's a genius, I'd be willing to wager my head. Go and see her."

Mrs. Pemberton passed on, and I proceeded to the sitting-room, which was immediately back of the drawing-room.

I was not in any mood to be amused, so without troubling myself to even take one peep at this eccentric looking female, I drew a chair before the fire and seated myself there.

My husband's voice, coming from the adjoining room, aroused me. If he were there, it might be worth my while to look; so I arose, and stepped softly to the heavy green curtains which hung before the long windows that served for a passage-way between the rooms. I parted them slightly, and peered in.

By the table stood Augustus and the book agent, who certainly tallied with Mrs. Pemberton's description; for her short skirt, long, full cloak, green poke bonnet, large victorine and muff of light fur, gave her a most antiquated appearance.

She was hurriedly, tremblingly turning over the leaves of a large book that had been placed upon the table, extolling its merits the while, and ever and anon looking up keenly, it seemed to me wistfully, into my husband's face.

He was evidently bored, and anxious to escape from the quavering voice of the odd little woman beside him.

Something prompted me to wait and watch.

Again and again she stopped short in her eulogiums of the publication under her hand, and seemed on the point of asking some question; it was as if she hesitated to do it, for each time she turned to the book again, and continued her stream of rapid talk as her trembling hands moved among the leaves.

At length Augustus turned abruptly from her, saying that he would see her again, and in the meantime would send some one else to her.

As he stepped toward the door, she started after him with one hand extended, as if she would stay him; but he was gone before she could reach him.

"Rather singular, that, for a book-agent," was my mental observation.

Further thought on the subject was prevented as I saw her gesture of despair, and heard her murmur:

"Why did I come? I dare not speak now that I am here; and yet, I must know—I must know, how—how it ended! I must know if my worst fears have come to pass!"

Her voice was no longer quavering and high, but low, and musical, and full of pain.

"It's a disguise, of course!" I muttered, contemptuously. "I suspected as much—and now I suspect a great deal more."

I cast one glance back into the room to see if I were still alone; finding that I was, I applied my eyes to the rift in the curtains again.

"Oh, what a night I have endured!" she moaned, as she moved swiftly to and fro, the while looking anxiously about her as if to guard against surprise.

"What a night of torture—of remorse! If I only knew—if only I could learn—if this suspense were only lifted from me, I believe I could endure the rest calmly."

"I was mad—yes, mad, to be so rash—to allow passion to sway me so. I did not stop to think; when I heard that his love was all another's—when I learned that my weary years of waiting had been in vain, then I became mad, and I—I—"

The rest I could not hear, for it was smothered in her bonnet as she sank into a chair by the table, and bowed her head upon it.

She had evidently forgotten that the greater portion of her bonnet extended in front of her face, and in bowing her head upon the table it was pushed back with such force that it fell upon her shoulders, taking with it the snug, smooth swiss cap, and the dark blue spectacles she wore.

And the face of Inez was before me.

Then I understood it all—why she was in disguise, her appealing looks to Augustus, her endeavor to stay him—her words, her agony.

I understood it all; she had received my note, or,

rather, the few words I had written; but, not satisfied with that, she had come to learn the truth for herself.

I stood there, glaring at her, as she hastily and tremblingly resumed her disguise, and then peered timidly around, as if to convince herself that she had not been seen.

"I had better go," she whispered. "Why did I come? I might have known that fear of discovery would make me timid. Yes, I will go—go, before any one else sees me—go, before anyone penetrates my disguise."

She darted to the table and took up the book, but she dropped it instantly as she wailed:

"Can I endure this suspense? No—no! I must learn the truth. I must see him again. I will be brave. I will wait, and when he returns I will speak to him. Yes, I will wait."

And she clasped her hands resolutely, and walked to the fire, before which she remained, gazing steadily upon it.

"Not so, my fine lady," I muttered. "You will not wait and see him, and tell him of the note. No—no, not at all! You will not see him, but you *will* see me."

Cautiously I parted the curtains, and stepped into the room.

Noiselessly I approached her. She did not stir, nor evince any consciousness of my presence.

I placed my hand upon her shoulder.

With a sudden start, she turned to me, and instantly she was aroused to a sense of her position.

Darting to the table, she opened her book, and began turning over leaf after leaf, as in her high, quavering voice she spoke:

"A household volume, madame; no house is complete without it. It affords amusement for the young, diversion for the old; and—and it entertains the middle-aged. It would just suit you, madame. See, here is an illustration that gives you an excellent idea of the—"

She stopped short, as she became aware that I was looking, not at the book, but at her.

I could not see her eyes, for her glasses screened them entirely, but I knew that she was disturbed; for her whole frame quivered as she bent over her book, and began her lines again.

I interrupted her, saying, simply:

"Inez."

She started violently.

Smiling scornfully, I went on:

"You see, I know you; and also why you have come here in disguise."

A faint moan fell from her lips.

"Why, how—when—where did you learn?" she faltered.

I nodded meaningly, as I made reply:

"I know *all*—that is enough for me to say."

"Oh, madame," she moaned, as she extended her hands pleadingly.

She vainly endeavored to say more; some fear made her mute. Her hands, that nervously clutched each other, told of some great agony.

I had no pity for her; she was my rival, as I believed, and my desire was to get her out of the house before Augustus could have an opportunity of penetrating her disguise.

"You must go at once," I said, quickly. "I know all, but I will spare you if you go at once, and never appear here again. But if you remain, or return, I will—"

"Oh, no—no, I will go," she faltered; "but, tell me, who are you?"

"That matters nothing to you," I replied, coldly.

"I am dependent on your mercy, madame—"

"You will not be," I interrupted, sharply; "for I shall have no mercy, unless you go at once. In another moment my patience may be gone."

"But, madame," she pleaded, "will you not tell me this—how did—how did it end? Has—I mean, is there danger of—"

"Yes, there is every danger," I interrupted, tartly; "again I advise you to go at once. My patience is—"

Before I had completed my sentence she had darted from the room; and in another moment I heard the front door close behind her.

CHAPTER XV.

FROM MOTT HAVEN TO NEW YORK.

"HOMEWARD bound!" said Augustus, cheerily, as he assisted me from the sleigh that had conveyed us from Mrs. Pemberton's to the depot.

"There's no place like home after all—eh, Martha?" he added, as he drew my hand upon his arm and led me to the waiting-room, which was uncomfortably crowded.

I managed to edge my way into one corner, and there I meekly waited while Augustus went to purchase tickets. Waited meekly, did I say? Yes, for about five minutes, then I began to grow impatient.

If it had been possible I should have started after him, to see if there were any necessity for this delay; but I was literally pinned into the corner by elbows, feet, and one huge market basket.

I was forced to endure quietly till the sound of the approaching train caused the usual stir; then I made a move towards finding Augustus. But he spared me the trouble; at the last moment he came hurrying to me panting:

"Such a jam! Between my endeavors to get to the ticket-office, and then to get back again to you, I'm crushed almost to a jelly. Come, we haven't a moment to spare."

He hurried me out to the train and helped me on board. I seated myself and was making room for him beside me, when, mingled with the clanging of the bell, the snorting and puffing of the engine, and the stentorian cries of "All aboard!" I heard his voice:

"There! In my hurry I left my note-book at the

ticket-office! It won't do to allow it to remain there, for I have important memoranda in it. I'll catch the train before it starts."

He was off like a flash. I saw him leap from the car, rush into the waiting-room, and then, as I had expected, the train moved on.

Every drop of blood in my veins tingled with my wrath. Was it not possible for me to have my husband's company for even so short a time as the ride to New York would take? Was I to be thwarted like this by him at every turn?

I started up with the intention of springing from the train; but realizing that that was too hazardous, I sank back into the seat.

Just then, I happened to glance out of the window ahead of me, and I caught a glimpse of a face at the waiting-room window—I knew it at once—it was the face of Inez! And then I saw Augustus standing on the platform, looking, in a satisfied way, it seemed to me, after the departing train.

The sight fairly puzzled me. I had felt so confident that I had effectually disposed of that rival, at least; and now she was there, and he was there, and, of course, that was why he had maneuvered so to be left behind.

I set my teeth hard together, and vowed to have vengeance.

"He thinks I'll go meekly home," I muttered, fiercely, "believing that he will follow on the next train. He'll probably be away all the evening, and then he'll relate to me a list of mishaps that prevented him from coming sooner. No—no, my fine sir, I'll not go meekly home! You'll see me again when you least expect it! I'll confront you suddenly, and startle you both! This time I *shall* not fail!"

With impatience I waited for the train to reach the next station. In ten minutes we were there.

In pursuance of the plan I had formed, I arose and alighted, and without losing a moment's time I repaired to the waiting-room to procure a ticket for Mott Haven; for I was going back at once.

I found the ticket office closed, and, upon inquiring, I learned that the next train for Mott Haven was due in fifty minutes.

That was a rebuff that had not entered into my calculations. Fifty minutes! No—no—no, I could not wait so long! Why, fifty minutes, under the circumstances, would seem like as many years! No, I must on at once!

I started out to try to procure a vehicle of some kind. The distance was only a little more than two miles, and it could be accomplished, by a good, swift horse, in a very short time.

But, alas! my endeavors were useless. Neither horse nor conveyance was procurable, for the passengers from the last train had monopolized the few of which the place boasted.

After fifteen minutes' fruitless searching I found myself back at the depot, despairing, yet more than ever determined to follow Augustus.

"What can I do?" I asked myself.

The answer came like an inspiration:

"Walk."

Without hesitating, I started to walk to Mott Haven, and oh! what a walk that was!

I dared not leave the track, for fear that I would lose my way, and it was almost impossible to maintain my footing upon the hard, smooth snow.

I slipped and fell again and again, and of course made very slow progress.

I became benumbed with the cold; still I kept bravely on, and on, straining my eyes to catch the first glimpse of my goal—the depot at Mott Haven.

To add to my discomfort, it began to snow, and then dusk came to deepen the gloom. Still, upheld by the prospect of the triumph before me, I faltered not.

At last—at last, lights in the distance told me that the end was near.

I quickened my steps, and soon I was at the depot. As I hurried to the waiting-room a train came along, stopped, received its passengers, and then continued on its way to New York.

Eagerly I opened the door and entered, prepared to annihilate them both with a glance.

I started back with dismay as I found the place empty. They were not there. Another rebuff that had not entered into my calculations.

I stood as if petrified for a moment; then slowly it dawned upon me that I had been a fool to believe that they would remain in that cheerless room during all the time it had taken me to reach it.

I admitted that I had been a fool, and then I resolved to go home.

The remembrance of that train flashed into my mind. I had just missed it, of course, and I found that thirty minutes must elapse ere another one was due.

I was in despair.

To wait there was dangerous, for I might be seen by someone who would know me; but it had to be done, for I was not willing to wander about in the cold for half an hour longer.

I pinned a thick veil over hat and face, and then I remained looking anxiously out of the window, watching the snow-flakes, thinking how dark it was getting to be, and wishing that I had not started on this wild chase after Augustus.

When I heard the rumble of the train, I hailed it with joy, for it was like the approach of deliverance to me.

It came nearer and nearer.

I glanced at the clock. Yes, thirty minutes had elapsed.

I started up gladly, purchased my ticket, hastened out upon the platform, and completely bewildered by my fears—by the hurrying to and fro, by the darkness, and the snow—I boarded the train without once looking to see in which direction it was bound.

It moved on, and I sat picturing my return to my

home, and wondering if Augustus would be there. Would he be waiting for me? Would he be anxious—

"Ticket, madame."

I passed my ticket to the conductor, and relapsed into my reverie again.

I was aroused from it by hearing somebody yelling something about "wrong train."

I looked up innocently, and I discovered that the conductor was addressing me.

"Your ticket is for New York," he cried.

"Of course it is," I replied.

"But this is the express for Boston, madame."

"What!" I screamed, starting to my feet.

"The express for Boston," he shouted, for at the rate the train was going the din was terrible.

I dropped upon the seat as if I had been shot.

For Boston! Oh, mercy; was it not enough without this?

But what should I do? Wait? No! I had had enough of waiting.

I sprang up with I know not what wild idea in my mind. My gaze fell upon the gentleman passenger in the seat directly behind me, and I came to a sudden stand-still.

Great heavens! Could I believe my eyes? Could it be? I stooped and peered into his face, for the lights were dim and my veil was thick, and I could not see distinctly; and thus I convinced myself that it was indeed—my husband!

CHAPTER XVI.

CAUGHT IN HIS OWN TRAP.

"AUGUSTUS RAY!"

It was all that I could say. The name escaped my lips in a sibilant whisper, and what a change it brought to the face of the man before me!

He had been glaring at me, as if resenting my impudence in staring at him so, but when he heard my voice, the truth seemed to flash over him, for he turned pale; discomfiture was written on every feature, and finally he gasped:

"By all that's unfortunate, it's Martha!"

He sat still, completely overwhelmed, and I stood supporting myself by the back of the seat, yet swaying to and fro with the motion of the car, as I tried to find voice to express my astonishment and my indignation. But before I could say a word, he, evidently having mastered the situation, arose, and with a firm hand forced me to be seated, and then he took his place beside me.

I made one attempt to speak, but he silenced me by saying, sternly:

"Wait. I don't care to have you entertaining all the passengers here! We will leave the train at the next station, and then we can settle accounts."

I passed the time in nursing my wrath; and when the train stopped, and we arose to alight, my indignation was so high, that I fairly trembled from head to foot; between that, and the obscurity of vision caused by the thick veil I wore, my exit from the car was made under difficulties.

But it was made, and no sooner made than I turned upon my husband, and demanded, in a tone of smothered rage:

"Now, sir, what does this mean? Why do I find you here? What were you doing on the express train to Boston? What is your object in going there? Why did you leave me this afternoon? Was it for a notebook; or, was it for a lady? Have you no consideration for me at all? Am I to be slighted and imposed upon by you always? Can you expect me to endure passively? Will you answer me? Where were you going? why were you going? when were you going?"

I had run the length of my tether; in other words, I was out of breath, and I was forced to stop.

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Augustus, earnestly. "A few more questions, and I should have given up in despair. Now, will you be good enough to begin again, Martha? but only one at a time, if you please, or I fear—"

"Augustus Ray," I interrupted, wrathfully, "will you explain now, at once, this very moment, what all this means? Why do I find you here?"

"I might, with more justice, put that very question to you, Martha," he returned, with an assumption of severity, as he took me by the arm, and led me down the platform. "Why are you here? What were you doing on that train? Where were you going?"

"Where?" I ejaculated, indignantly. "Where? Why, home, of course!"

Augustus laughed, a low, scornful laugh.

"What now?" I demanded.

"Were you not taking rather a roundabout way to get home?" he asked, ironically. "To go from Mott Haven to New York via Boston is, something new, is it not?"

I was dumbfounded. I had not thought of myself, and of the afternoon's trials. Could I admit all that to Augustus? Could I thus expose myself to his ridicule? no—a thousand times, no!

I stood before him, silenced.

"Martha, why do you not answer me? Where were you going? You will not be so foolish—I am compelled to say foolish—as to tell me again that you were going home by that train."

"But I was," I said, softly.

"Oh, Martha, how can you expect me to believe that?"

"You can do as you please about it," I snapped. "But we are departing from the original subject; the question was not where I was going, but where you were going. What is your answer, sir? why were you on that train?"

"Because you were there."

Again I was dumbfounded, as a terrible possibility flashed itself upon me, and it was that he knew of the wild chase I had been on that afternoon?

"Because—I—was—there?" I faltered, feeling that I must say something.

"Yes, Mrs. Ray, because you were there."

"But how—how did you know that—that—"

"How did I know that you were there?" he cried, exultantly. "How—how, you ask?"

"Yes, how?" I assented, impatiently.

"I will tell you, Mrs. Ray; by following you."

"You—have—followed—me?" I gasped.

"Yes, madame, I have followed you. When you boarded the train, I boarded it also, determined to know what was the purpose of your journey. Now, Mrs. Ray, will you explain—"

"There, we've said enough," I interrupted, impatiently. "If you have been expecting any startling denouement to my journey, you would have been sadly disappointed, that's all. So you have been following me all the afternoon?"

"Yes, all the afternoon."

"I hope you have enjoyed it," I laughed.

"Martha—Martha, how can you treat the matter lightly? When a fond and trusting husband finds—"

"If that fond and trusting husband would find some way of getting home, he would make his wife comparatively happy, for she is very tired, and it is late, and cold. Come, Augustus, anything is better than waiting here; go and get a conveyance of some kind, if it's only a wheelbarrow. I want to go home. Heaven knows I've been a long time trying to get there!" I added, sotto voce.

He turned from me with a light laugh; it was more like a chuckle, as if he were exulting over his success in having extricated himself from an embarrassing position.

To my great relief and delight, we were spared a long and tedious ride home, for a train came puffing along, and when it started on again, we were among the passengers.

In due course of time we reached New York, and soon we were rolling along the city streets towards home.

Home! what innumerable blessings and comforts were embodied in that word to me now. Home, after such a chase as I had had that afternoon! Why, it was a haven of rest and peace.

So delighted was I at the prospect of my return—at the thought of being where I could gain warmth for my half-frozen limbs, and rest for my wearied frame, that I forgot everything unpleasant, and chatted and laughed with Augustus with unnatural feverish gaiety. In perfect good-humor we entered our home. A heartier "thank God!" never escaped my lips than did then as I stood once more in our luxurious sitting-room.

I laid aside my furs and my bonnet, and then I seated myself before the fire to bask in its genial warmth.

With a long-drawn sigh of satisfaction, I placed my feet upon the fender, and leaned my head back upon the chair. I lifted my eyes and looked about me. Augustus stood beneath the chandelier, absently twirling his mustache.

"How handsome he is!—how manly!—how graceful!" I murmured, fondly. "And he is mine!—my husband! Should I not be happy? And why am I not? Because I doubt his love. But I will do so no more; I will believe him. I am needlessly suspicious, as this day's events have proven. I will not wrong him again."

"So he followed me," I mused, as I looked toward the fire again. "I wonder—"

But I came to a sudden stop, as my eyes fell upon an envelope on the mantel. Mechanically I gained possession of it. It was addressed to me in my husband's handwriting; that made me eager.

I tore it open hurriedly, unfolded the sheet and read:

"SWEET ONE:—How unfortunate it was that I did not succeed in catching the train after regaining my notebook. After a weary, dreary time of waiting, and a wearier, drearier ride, I reached home. I cannot understand your absence. In the natural order of things you should have been here before me; but, since you are not, I am forced to write that which I would rather tell you by word of mouth. An imperative business call compels me to leave at once for Philadelphia. Could I postpone it, dearest, I would; but it is impossible. I will explain particulars when I return, which will be to-morrow."

"Do not grieve during my absence, darling; comfort yourself by thinking of my utter misery while away from you. Till to-morrow, adieu."

"Your devoted husband,"

"GESSIE."

I wondered that my gaze did not consume the sheet of paper in my hand. What a contradiction was this! Following me—following me, indeed! Base—base fabricator, to tell me that he had been following me, when he had been in New York to his home, had left word that he had gone to Philadelphia, and I had found him on the way to Boston! Oh, base—base fabricator! And I had accused myself of having wronged him. Again I was trembling with indignation, trembling so that the paper in my hand rustled.

I sprang from my chair, and reaching Augustus, I flouted the note right in his face, as I panted:

"Wretch—deceiver—prevaricator—equivocator! how could you dare—how did you dare—"

Anger choked me, I could not go on.

I saw that Augustus was dumbfounded. He stood twirling his mustache savagely, as he glared at the missive in my hand—the trap he had set for me, into which he had fallen himself.

I heard him mutter:

"The devil! That infernal note—I forgot all about it."

"What have you to say for yourself now?" I managed to articulate at length.

"Martha, do be reasonable," he began.

"Reasonable!" I cried. "Do you mean to insinuate that I am not reasonable?"

"I don't insinuate it, I say it right out."

"What!" I screamed, fairly beside myself with rage. "What! am I unreasonable because I demand an explanation of this? You tell me that you have been following me—"

"Never mind what I have said, Martha; direct your attention to that which you are saying now, and take care that you do not step beyond the bounds of toleration."

"You threaten me, Augustus Ray?"

"This is absurd, Martha—you will allow me to say absurd."

I stamped one foot in the excess of my fury, as I cried:

"Explain—explain at once! Do not parry my questions again—what does this mean? Following me—going to Philadelphia—on the way to Boston!" I broke off thus recounting the injuries that had been done me. "Oh, misery! how can I endure all this—how can I endure all this?"

"If you were calm, Martha, I should explain it to you—"

"Of course you would explain it!" I cried, hotly. "You always do explain! But what are your explanations worth?"

"Then you doubt my word?"

"Doubt! Ha—ha! Doubt your word! How can I do else?"

"Then I shall not attempt to say a word in my defense," and he folded his arms across his breast, and drew himself up proudly. "Misjudge me as you will—put whatever construction you choose upon that note. And since it is happiness for you to doubt me, then in Heaven's name, indulge yourself to the utmost."

He turned and walked slowly, proudly to the door. I started after him, but he stayed me by an imperious wave of the hand. I saw that, and I heard his voice, stern and cold, saying:

"I am going, Martha; do not follow me. Good-by."

Then it seemed to me that the room was whirling around and around, and I with it. Darkness was closing about me, and a confusion of sounds made a terrible din in my ears.

The day's trials had been more than I could endure. I remember making one frantic endeavor to reach Augustus, who seemed to be floating away into a bright and dazzling realm; then I seemed to be sinking down—down into the deep and awful darkness of some trackless void.

CHAPTER XVII.

MY NURSE.

My first sensation upon the recovery of consciousness was a strange feeling of weariness, as if I had been toiling along for countless ages.

I opened my eyes, and looked about me. Where was I?

I saw the reflection of the room in the mirror opposite—a room gorgeous with the glitter of cut glass and ornaments, upholstery of walnut and dark green velvet, a large, lace draped bed, with flying cupids hovering near, hung by invisible wires, brackets at every angle, with lovely little statuettes on them, flowers in bright bloom, books in handsome bindings. Where was I? And I had almost asked, who was I? when I became conscious that some one was bending over me.

Who was it? A stranger to me, surely, and that deepened my perplexity as to my whereabouts and my identity.

It was a woman. I looked her over quickly and keenly. The face seemed somewhat familiar. Dark and beautiful and proud, with curling ruby lips, and bright black eyes; but the hair of reddish gold, the deep red blotch on one cheek, dispelled the idea that I had seen her before.

She had a coquettish cap of black lace on her head, and her attire was plain and neat, consisting of a short skirt of dark brown, full waist and sleeves, a long white apron, and a white neckerchief pinned about her shoulders.

Who was she?

She broke the silence, and as she spoke her voice seemed like some sweet, half-forgotten strain of music—some strain that I had heard before I had started on this long and toilsome journey that I had just completed.

"Madame, you are better."

"Am I?" I asked, absently.

"Yes. Shall I call your husband?"

"My husband! Ah! That enabled me to establish my own identity."

A thrill of gladness, such as a wanderer might feel upon returning home after a long absence, passed over me.

"Shall I call him, madame?"

"You mean Augustus?" I asked.

"Yes. He will be delighted to know that you are better," and she turned to go.

"Stay!" I cried, faintly, as I reached out my hand to detain her. "Who am I?"

"Who are you?" she exclaimed, in amazement.

"I mean where have I been?"

"You have been very ill, madame."

"How long have I been here?"

"Over a week."

"Only a week! It has seemed like years. And this is home?"

"Yes."

"And you are—you are—who are you?"

"Your nurse, madame."

"My nurse! Indeed!"

"Yes. You were taken suddenly ill, and your husband, he sent—or rather, he came—I meant to say, he heard of me, and procured my services."

"Indeed!" I was rapidly coming to myself, for a twinge of jealousy racked me as I looked at her, as she stood in a flood of sunlight, that glorified and in

tensified her beauty till she seemed a fit subject for some master-artist's pencil: and almost unwittingly I gave expression to my thoughts by saying:

"Are you not rather too pretty to be a nurse?"

An amused smile flitted over her face; she said, quickly:

"I will call your husband," and she was gone.

Augustus came in, and the sight of his handsome, smiling face brought me to a full sense of all that was, and all that had been.

Surely, the glad greeting he gave me was not simulation, nor the kiss, the tender words, his joy at my recovery. I felt then that my husband loved me, that though volatile, at heart he was true.

"Who is she, Augustus?" I asked, abruptly.

"She—whom?"

"The nurse."

"The nurse—the nurse?" he mused.

"Yes, the nurse," I said, almost sharply, for I did not like this apparent forgetfulness of his.

It was an assumption, I felt; and would he assume if there was no reason for it?

"Oh, yes, the nurse!" he exclaimed, laughingly.

"Your nurse, you mean."

"You've forgotten the existence of such a person, I suppose," I snapped.

"Well, yes, I had. Who is she, you asked?"

"Yes," I assented, impatiently.

"Well, I am not prepared to go into any details about her. She is called Mary, I believe—"

"Mary!" I sneered.

"Yes, Mary. Not an uncommon name—"

"Don't tell me that her name is Mary," I said, angrily, as I raised myself on one elbow, and looked keenly at Augustus. "She's altogether too pretty to be called Mary."

"Phew!" he whistled, drawing back in his chair, and looking askance at me.

"Yes, and she's altogether too pretty to be a nurse."

"Martha, you're getting better," and he arose, thrust his hands into his pockets, and looked smilingly upon me. "There's no doubt of it, you're getting better; in fact, I might say, you are well. Go on, my love—go on; that sounds natural, and it rids me of my fear that you will have to endure a tedious convalescence."

Nothing would have conduced to my recovery with such effect as the presence of that pretty nurse in the family.

That very afternoon I arose from my bed, and with the assistance of Mary—how my blood tingled as I pronounced her name—I began to make my toilet.

Enveloping myself in a dressing-wrap of white cambric, I sat down before the mirror, and Mary stationed herself behind my chair, comb and brush in hand.

"What splendid hair you have, madame," she said, as the process of combing had proceeded for several moments in silence.

I was so busily thinking of the satisfaction with which I would tell her on the morrow that I could dispense with her services, that though I heard her words, I made no reply.

"It is so long, and such a beautiful color," she went on, like one determined to talk. "I don't fancy light hair; now, if I had light hair, I'd—"

I looked up quickly at her image in the glass, and I saw that she was confused.

"Do you know what you are saying?" I asked, tartly.

"Certainly, ma'am. I said that if I had light hair like some folks—"

"You didn't say anything of the kind."

"I meant it, at any rate, madame. What I was going to say was, that I have combed hair for some folks—light hair, you know—but it couldn't be compared to yours. Now, there's Miss Haverhill—"

"Florence Haverhill?" I asked, eagerly—interested at once.

"Yes, ma'am," and from nervousness, or some emotion, she began using the brush unmercifully.

"She's got light hair, you know."

"Yes, but don't pull mine so, if she has. Do you know her?"

"A little. She is very nice—"

"Is that any reason why you should be so rough with your brush?"

"Beg pardon, madame. What a pity she got hurt so badly! How did it happen?"

I caught a glimpse in the mirror of a pale, anxious face, and her tones I fancied were tremulous and timid; but I forgot that in the agony of hair-pulling.

"Mary," I cried, "do be gentle! She was injured by a skate. There—there, you're pulling again; but how, and by whom, is a mystery. Oh—oh! my hair! I'm sure you've pulled out a handful! She could not tell anything about it when she became conscious; the theory is that, in some way, she inflicted the injury upon herself."

"Do you believe that, madame?"

"Do I believe it? Why shouldn't I? I'm sure I don't know anything about it. I suppose you've heard that I found her in the road, and like everybody else, you think I must know all about it! Well, I don't! Whether she was attacked by rustlers, or robbers, or brigands, or Indians, or wild beasts, is as much of a mystery to me as to any one."

"Thank God! Then I am safe!" the nurse exclaimed, accompanying her words with such a vigorous pull on my hair that my head was forced back rudely.

"Will you stop?" I cried, angrily, as I turned on her abruptly—so abruptly that she started, and dropped the brush from her hand.

She stooped to pick it up. In doing so, her head came in contact with the back of the chair. Was it imagination, or did I really see the yellow hair slip back, and disclose jet-black hair beneath?

I had no opportunity to ascertain, for raising her

hands to her head, and moaning as if with pain, she darted from the room.

"She shall go this very night," I muttered, angrily. "There is something very strange about her."

Anger gave me strength, and enabled me to complete my toilet alone, which I did with an eye to effect. I donned a house-robe of mauve silk, elaborately trimmed with velvet of a darker shade, and fastened with delicate white lace bows, in which were imbedded ornaments of coral at my throat and on my hair.

The week's illness had reduced my color considerably; I flattered myself that I looked pale and interesting, and with intense satisfaction I left the room, to descend and surprise Augustus.

Slowly I made my way along till I reached the staircase; there I was fairly rooted to the spot, as down in the hall below I saw my husband and the nurse—he, looking smilingly down into her upturned face, she with one hand resting on his arm, talking glibly and gladly, ever and anon interspersing her words with a low, musical laugh.

Before I recovered from my astonishment, my indignation, my horror, they had parted.

"The mix! The impudent hussy!" I muttered between my shut teeth. "I shall dismiss her at once."

And then I descended to have an interview with Augustus.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DECEIVED.

I REACHED the sitting-room door, which was ajar.

I paused there as I saw Augustus within, pacing moodily to and fro, his thumbs thrust in his vest pockets, his head bent forward upon his breast, his brow knitted—the very picture of perplexity.

Once, as he neared me, I heard him mutter:

"Heaven grant it may come in time! If not, how am I to get away!"

I attached no importance to his words; I heard them, but I forgot them at once, for something in his looks quelled the ire in my heart, and awakened all my sympathy.

Was he in trouble? Surely, his appearance indicated that; and if so—if real trouble were his, then he would have no truer friend, no readier helper, than his wife.

His back was toward me as I entered. Slow steps and slithered feet made my movements noiseless. I had my hand upon his arm before he was aware of my presence.

He turned quietly, and the start, the gasp that followed, suggested to me that he had expected to behold the nurse.

Anger flamed up again, but he dispelled it as he caught my hands in his, and with a look of rare delight upon his face, said, gladly:

"My dear Martha, this is a surprise! Of course you are pale, and a little thin; but, bless me! I never saw you look so well—never!"

His praise pleased me, and I could but show it. He touched my dress, my laces and corals, in a way that was in itself a compliment, and I felt fully repaid for the pains I had taken with my toilet.

He helped me to a chair before the fire, fixed an ottoman under my feet, insisted on my having the lace-covered sofa-cushion for a support to my hand; and then he seated himself opposite to me, and looked and nodded approvingly.

I glanced over to the mirror, and indeed it was no unpleasant picture; the deep red velvet of the chair formed an effective background for my mauve silk and laces, and my pale face and dark hair were brought into equally effective relief by the lace-covered cushion.

I looked upon myself, then around on the luxuriously furnished room, and then upon my handsome husband, and for a moment I seemed to be in Paradise; but only for a moment, for like the serpent of old, the thought of the meeting in the hall that I had just witnessed came trailing into my mind. Paradise faded, and I was in Tophet again.

"Augustus," I began, sharply.

A loud peal of the door-bell interrupted me.

Augustus started to his feet, with a glad cry of:

"Heaven be praised! That must be it!"

"Must be what?" I asked, tartly.

A moment's confusion, but he recovered himself, and replied:

"Why, the King of the Cannibal Islands, at the very lowest venture. It can be no less a personage than that, to judge from the ring."

A knock at the door. Augustus answered it with unwonted elasticity, it seemed to me.

A telegram was passed to him. He took it eagerly, tore it open, and read it; then he sank into a chair with a low exclamation of:

"Great Heavens! Can this be?"

And there he sat, holding the telegram at arm's length and staring at it, looking like one who had been the recipient of most distressing news.

"What is it?" I asked, softly.

"Oh, Martha," he groaned. "It is so sad. But read for yourself," he added, as he arose and came to me. I took the telegram, and read:

"Augustus: Come at once. I am dying. Wife and children are at the mercy of hard-hearted creditors. I appeal to you in my extremity. In God's name, I beg of you to come at once. HARRY."

"The friend of my youth," Augustus explained, as I looked up inquiringly. "We were boys together, Martha; we went to the same school, sat on the same seat, used the same slate, eat from the same plate." Then, overcome by emotion evidently, he buried his face in his snowy handkerchief.

After a moment, he looked up, and added:

"Can I refuse his appeal? No—decidedly no. Martha, I must go."

"Where?" I asked.

"Where? Why, Philadelphia, isn't it?"

"Isn't it?" I mocked. "I should think you would know."

"And so I do. Of course it is Philadelphia," as he took the message from my hands.

"Philadelphia," I mused. "If I remember right, important business once called you there, and I found you on the way to Boston. Perhaps this is also a ruse."

"Martha," he interrupted, "you must not state anything for a fact that occurred on the day on which you were taken ill. Remember, you were then on the verge of delirium, and don't assail me now with any chimera of yours that then had birth. In my distress," he added, brokenly, "can you have the heart to doubt, and question? I am going, and at once. It is now two o'clock. I shall just have time to make a few preparations, go to the bank—"

"To the bank?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, to the bank. Surely, you will not allow me to go to my dying friend without the wherewithal to relieve his terrible anxiety about his wife and children! Give with a willing hand, my love, and great will be your reward. There's a train at three; I must take that. Come, Martha, I haven't a moment to spare. There's table, pen and ink; I'll get your check-book, and pack my valise. My good angel!" as he stooped and kissed me, "what should I do without you?"

And he hurried from the room, giving me no time to say a word.

Of course, he had his way. The pen was in my hand, and I was making out a check for three thousand dollars before I knew what I was doing. Then my husband whisked it into his note-book, embraced me tenderly, kissed me good-by, left the room and the house, while I stood breathlessly asking myself: what has happened?

Slowly the realization came to me. I could not doubt Augustus now, for there was the telegram, dated from Philadelphia; that proved him true.

I sat musing sadly for over an hour.

Then I bethought myself of the nurse, and I arose to go and dismiss her.

I sought her in my room; she was not there. I then proceeded to her room; neither was she there. I was about to turn away, when my eyes fell upon an object on the table that sent all the blood coursing madly through my veins. It was a wig—a wig of reddish-gold hair!

I sprang out into the hall, and pulled the bell-rope furiously. My breath was coming short and quick, I was trembling from head to foot, and more for support than from intention, I kept pulling on the rope till the house resounded with the clanging of the bell.

A mad patter of feet, a wild rush as of the approach of an army, a perfect babel of voices and cries arose to my hearing.

"Is it fire, do you think?"

"Maybe it's murder!"

"She's fainted, I'm thinking."

"P'raps it's thieves."

"Better call the police."

"Mebbe it's the doctor that's wanted."

And then, first one scared face, and another, and another appeared on the staircase, and soon I was surrounded by my corps of domestics, all panting, breathless and excited, whose commingled voices, in respect to noise, would have done justice to an infuriated mob.

I raised both hands, and with frantic gestures warned them to silence.

"The nurse," I gasped, as a lull came. "Where is she?"

"Gone," was the reply. "She went this afternoon."

Gone! I knew now who she was; since the yellow hair was false, I knew why her face had seemed familiar. It was Inez. And she was gone—and Augustus was gone!

Horrible fears assailed me. With one last frantic effort, I ordered the servants back to their posts. They trooped down the stairs, sending back a murmur of disappointment to me; and I staggered to my room to try to realize this bitter—bitter blow.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN PURSUIT.

WOULD Inez have entered my house if there were not some reason for it? And her reason seemed palpable enough to me; it was to reinstate herself in my husband's affections!

The resemblance of that note that had come to Augustus when he had failed to keep his appointment with her, (of course, it was with her; that was as clear to my mind as the knowledge of my own name) and of the answer I had sent her; of her agitation the following day, when she had come in the capacity of book-agent, proved to me that she loved my husband.

Was he indifferent to her?

I thought of his attempt to appear forgetful of the nurse's presence, of the meeting in the hall that I had witnessed, of his subsequent moodiness, and last of his departure at, or about the time that she had gone, and I answered my question with the vehemence born of despair.

"No—no, he is not indifferent! He has left me—and for her!"

But could it be possible? I loved my husband well enough to give him the benefit of a doubt. Could it be possible that he was so false to me as this last act would prove him to be?

I retraced my way to the sitting-room, and picked up that telegram.

There it was, a bona-fide telegram, dated from Philadelphia. Oh, it could not be a ruse! And yet—I shook my head sadly, and sighed deeply, as I remembered the very significant departure of the nurse—significant, because her presence in my family in disguise was so significant; a disguise which Augustus had evidently fathomed.

What should I do? Passively wait till time proved my fears true, or showed to me that I had wronged my husband?

No—no—anything but suspense! But what could I do?

Ah, his office! The thought came to me like an inspiration.

His office! Why not go there, and see what I could discover?

I looked at the clock—the hour was four.

"If he has gone to Philadelphia," I muttered, "he is now well on his way. If he has not gone, then I may find him at his office. But that is not likely," I added, disconsolately. "I suppose he has left town altogether. He may now be taking his once interrupted journey to Boston. Who knows? Alas, not I!"

It will be remembered that this was the first day of my convalescence; in consequence, I could not endure this bitter—bitter blow with any degree of fortitude.

I had not strength enough to get angry; if rage, that had never yet failed to sustain me, could have sustained me now, I should not have been so utterly wretched. I wept—wonderful thing for me, I wept—yes, and bitterly.

Again and again I resolved to go to his office, but each time I gave it up as a useless endeavor. Still, it was all I could do, and even in its hopelessness it was better than suspense and passive endurance.

At last, I arose to make myself ready to go.

I looked at the elegant mauve robe I wore, and wondered if it would not be a wise and a sensible thing to change it for one less likely to suffer from contact with the bare boards and dusty surroundings of such an office as Augustus had repeatedly assured me his was.

"Up three flights of dirty, rickety stairs, a dirty, poorly-lighted, ill-ventilated room, minus carpet, furnished with a couple of three-legged stools, a one-armed arm-chair, a packing-box for a book-case, and an old ironing table for a writing-desk. The dust on the window panes answers for shades. We keep a stock of cobwebs constantly on hand, in case of cuts, or bruises; besides, they help to ornament the room."

It's no place for you, Martha. A crowd of gapers and loungers is always to be found at the entrance, and I do not wish my wife to run the gauntlet of their impertinent looks. It is no place for you at all."

Such was his description of the sanctum in which he pursued his daily labors in the interest of the Patent Horse-shoe Combination; and I, like a dutiful and confiding wife, heeded him, and had never yet intruded there.

In fact, so unsuspecting and trusting was I that I did not know the precise location of this sanctum. Somewhere down town, was the rather indefinite knowledge I had of its situation.

I finally came to a decision upon my course of action.

I rang the bell, and ordered the carriage to be brought around at once; then, allowing the mauve silk and corals to remain, I donned my fur-lined cloak, a dark hat, and a dark veil.

With timid, hesitating steps I descended, for truth to tell, I shrink from the idea of "running the gauntlet," as Augustus had expressed it, of the impertinent looks of the loungers, and of mounting dirty stairs to a still dirtier room.

And, what then? Might I not be met by the questioning looks and meaning smiles of the other members of the firm of the Patent Horse-shoe Combination? If so, what should I say? ask for my husband?

Such reflections caused me to hesitate at every step I took. Still, I reached the carriage, gave the word to Thomas, who, I knew, had many a time brought Augustus to his sanctum.

"Mr. Ray's office."

Ignoring the stare—the smile with which the order was received, I entered, and was driven off.

Then it was too late to go back; there was nothing to do but go on, and on I went till the carriage stopped.

Thomas descended, and opened the door, saying:

"Mr. Ray's office, ma'am."

I sat staring blankly at the building before me—a handsome structure of light brown stone, the wide steps in front leading to the doors of the—bank, and those at the side to a stately entrance, on one side of which was suspended a sign bearing the legend:

"Offices to let."

Where was the dirt? where the crowd of gapers and loungers? where the rickety stairs?

I looked away from the building to Thomas, and questioned, doubtfully:

"This—is this Mr. Ray's office?"

"Yes'm."

"Well!" I exclaimed.

Then putting my head out of the carriage door, I looked around again for the dirt, the rickety stairs, and the gaping crowd; but in vain.

Again I turned to Thomas:

"Are you sure that Mr. Ray's office is here?"

"Yes'm, sure. I've driven him here many times."

"Well!" I exclaimed again.

Then a vague idea dawned upon me that it would be well to alight. I gathered my long cloak about me, and stepped from the carriage; and on the street I stood, still doubting.

Could it be that Augustus had so deceived me? Was it not more likely that Thomas was at fault?

For the third time I turned to him:

"Thomas, are you quite positive that Mr. Ray's office is here?"

"Yes'm," he patiently replied. "You'll find it on the first floor, front, ma'am."

First floor, front. And he had told me:

"Up three flights of rickety stairs."

I hesitated no longer. Rage came then to sustain me.

Curtly, I ordered Thomas to go home, as I wished to have no witness to my emotions, whatever they would be, after I had made my visit to my husband's office.

I ascended the stoop, entered the wide hall, and slowly made my way up the broad staircase.

"First floor, front," Thomas had said. I peered forward, and saw that the door to that room was partly open.

Open! Then Augustus had not gone to Philadelphia! He was here.

I compressed my lips, and started angrily forward. The remembrance of the other members of the firm brought me to a sudden standstill. Possibly, they were there, and Augustus was away, after all.

That reflection made me cautious. On tiptoe I now advanced. I reached the door, and paused there in a listening attitude.

Not a sound broke the stillness.

I knocked timidly.

No reply.

I knocked again, with less timidity.

Still no reply.

Yet again I knocked, with no timidity at all, but sharply, angrily, for my ire was fast deepening.

No reply even then.

Then I ventured to open the door. I did it slowly, cautiously, so that in case Augustus was not there, but others were, I could beat a retreat unperceived.

Inch by inch it moved, till I, at length, mustered up sufficient courage to peer in. I peered in, and beheld—nobody.

CHAPTER XX.

ANOTHER DEFEAT.

"Bah!" I cried, disdainfully, as I flung the door wide open, and entered, angrily.

I was angry at myself for having exercised so much timidity and cautiousness for nothing; but anger gave way to amazement as I surveyed the room—not the room of my husband's description, dirty, poorly-lighted, ill-ventilated, with three-legged stools, and one-armed chairs, but a room faultlessly splendid in its elegant appointments.

I stood in the center, mouth and eyes wide open, as I wheeled around and took note of one article after another—velvet carpet, in the soft pile of which my feet fairly sank, gold leaf and drab on the walls, pictures of rare beauty, upholstering of drab with rich red cords and tassels, a mosaic table, an escritoire of inlaid ebony, a mirror, costly bric-a-brac everywhere; and in an arch at the end of the room were three exquisite statues—Faith, Hope, and Charity, which had for a background the heavy hangings of rich red velvet.

"Dust and dirt! Cobwebs! Ironing-tables! Packing-box!" I ejaculated, wrathfully. "Oh, Augustus—Augustus! Now I begin to understand where so much money goes!"

And again I wheeled around, and noted each elegant bit the room contained.

I came to the escritoire; it was open, and upon it were papers, envelopes, etc., scattered. I stepped to it. A letter, the seal unbroken, caught my eye.

I snatched it up with an exclamation of rage, as I recognized the hand that had addressed it to my husband. It was from Floy.

I held it for a moment as I deliberated: Should I open it, and learn its contents?

I dropped it as if it had been a live coal, as I heard a footfall on the stair-case.

Who could it be? Possibly, one of the other members of the firm. What excuse could I give for being there?

I looked wildly about for some way of escape, when the comforting reflection came:

"It may be the occupant of another office than this."

Just then the footfall was accompanied by another sound—a whistle. Ah, I knew it was my husband's!

Then he had not gone to Philadelphia!

A glow of fierce delight thrilled every fiber of my being! Oh, the triumph that would be mine when he beheld me there!

How discomfited he would be! How humiliated!

But stay—had I ever yet triumphed? Had victory ever yet been mine? No. I was forced to admit that; and might it not be so now?

Perhaps his departure had been delayed by the missing of a train; perhaps this was not his office, after all; perhaps—oh, forty such reflections came crowding into my mind, and I felt that to face Augustus then would be to my own humiliation.

"If I could secrete myself," I murmured, as I looked quickly around, "till some words of his convict himself, then triumph would be mine. The very thing!" I added, joyfully, as my eyes rested upon the heavy velvet hangings behind the three statues; and in another moment I had darted behind them, finding plenty of room in their ample folds.

Whistling gaily, Augustus entered.

I dared not move the curtains so that I could see him; I scarcely dared to breathe. I had to be content with hearing, till the proper moment came for me to appear to him.

I heard him sigh, and then came a sound as of pacing to and fro; then an exclamation.

"Ah, a letter! And from Floy! Poor—poor Floy," he added, pityingly.

He was tearing it open. Oh, with what breathless eagerness I waited. Would he read it aloud?

I heard low, indistinct muttering. I strained my ears, but all I could make out was a continued um—um—um—um.

I bit my lips, and clenched my hands with disappointment and vexation; then I determined to step forth, for I began to feel that I stood in danger of suffocation behind that heavy, clinging screen, when, to my great joy, I heard his voice.

"I will be at the opera to-night at the academy. I go with the hope that you will heed my prayer, and come. I must see you—I must!"

Then followed another interval of um—um—um—um, and then, after a rustling of the paper as if he were turning back to the beginning, he read aloud again.

For the reader's benefit I will give the letter in full. The words italicized are those which I heard.

"MY DEAR FRIEND.—To you, my only confidante, I come in my distress. *Pique has given way to despair; I cannot endure this longer.* Against my father's wishes, *against reason, I sometimes think, I love Edgar Wells, the friend of your youth.* To be his wife is the only happiness life holds for me."

"On the night of Mrs. Pemberton's ball, we were to be married. Our scheme was frustrated, as you know, and subterfuge was resorted to so that no knowledge or suspicion of Edgar's presence in America could accrue—a fact which, if discovered, would result in my captivity till I could be transported back to my hard-hearted papa."

"I met Edgar again on the day on which we all went skating on the river. I promised again to become his wife. That very night I was to leave the house to meet him; you know how I was prevented from keeping the appointment; by unconsciousness, the result of the blow that had been dealt me by some one."

"Since then I have neither heard from nor seen Edgar. What can his silence mean? Is it not strange that he has not even sought to learn why I failed to meet him? At first I resented it; but now—Oh, I cannot feel anger longer! My despair, my agony, I cannot describe to you. I appeal to you for help. You alone know of Edgar's presence here; you alone can aid me—will you?"

"I will be at the opera to-night at the academy. I go with the hope that you will heed my prayer and come. I must see you—I must! You may have some word of comfort for me; perhaps you have some knowledge of Edgar's whereabouts. I must know what this silence means. I beg of you, come."

"Yours in friendship, "*Floy.*"

"Poor girl!" sighed Augustus. "Ah, love—love, with what torments you visit us! How will this end—how will this end? Of course I will see her to-night; I cannot refuse her. Poor—poor Floy!"

A period of silence. That was my moment, I felt, but I was trembling so—I was so overpowered by that which I had heard, and from the want of air, that I was forced to cling to the curtains for support.

"One moment," I said to myself, "I must wait a moment longer and try to compose myself."

"That telegram will do me good service," was the next I heard. "Poor Martha, how I am forced to delude her! What would she say if she knew that a friend of mine in Philadelphia sent the message to me at my request? A great deception it was, I know; but what else could I do? Those payments had to be made, and how else could I obtain the money from her than by artifice? Poor Martha—poor, deluded Martha! She is fancying now, I suppose, that I have almost reached 'the city of brotherly love.' She will think of me to-night as bending over the bedside of a dying friend, or comforting his bereaved wife and children. What would she say if she knew—?"

"What would she say?"

It was my intention to shriek out the words, but from rage and faintness, my voice died away in a faint hiss.

I flung the curtains aside, and sprang forward, crying:

"Augustus!"

But the word was drowned by the bang with which the door was closed.

A key grated in the lock, and retreating footsteps sounded without.

I stood spell-bound, dimly realizing that I had been locked in.

CHAPTER XXI.

DESPAIR—JOY.

HAD he seen me? No; clearly he had not.

My exit from behind the hangings, and his exit from the room had transpired at one and the same instant.

He went on, blissfully unconscious of my presence in his sanctum; and I remained behind—a prisoner.

What should I do? Ere I had come to a full realization of my position, the sound of my husband's footsteps had died away entirely; so I was stayed from my first impulse—to call after him.

Should I knock on the door, or in some other way try to attract the attention of some one else? Thank Heaven, reflection came in time to deter me from that! If some one should have heard me, and had come to my rescue—say the janitor, for instance—what excuse could I give for my presence there?

Could I admit that I was Mrs. Ray? No; for the fact of my being locked in, would at once proclaim the whole truth. I could not call for anyone; I could not force the lock—I dared not even try; I could not leap from the windows; in short, I could do nothing.

Where was my triumph now? Had I ever suffered so ignominious a defeat as this? How was I going to

Was it Augustus? If he should see me now my plan would fail. But no, it could not be he.

I cast one glance at the bandbox, saw that it was balanced by a checked gingham bundle, saw that the bearer was a fastidious young man, but ere I had reached his face, the last bell sounded out, and I darted wildly for the car.

With the united efforts of three others and myself the ascent was made, and soon I had found a seat, near the stove, of course; the train moved on, and I sat panting and trembling, and wondering if that had been Augustus.

I thought of the bandbox, and the bundle, and I scouted the idea as being too ridiculous to be harbored for an instant. Augustus, my fastidious husband, carrying a bandbox, and a huge bundle, and acting as escort to a tall female with corns! Oh, no, it was absurd—simply absurd!

Then I turned my thoughts to the errand upon which I was bound. How would it end? I did not feel quite satisfied with the start I had made, and I queried rather anxiously:

"How will it end?"

The train reached Mott Haven, and with a sort of idle curiosity I watched the passengers as they alighted.

My gaze was attracted by the appearance of a bandbox out of the corner of the car, near which I was seated; then followed a gingham bundle, and then a man's legs. Now I should know if my fear had been true.

No, it had not, for, as he alighted, I saw that it was Mr. Filkins; who very gently assisted the steeple-like female with corns to alight, tucked her hand under his arm, and with her on one side, bandbox and bundle on the other, he walked boldly down the platform.

"Brave man!" I murmured, approvingly. "Augustus would have fainted under such an ordeal. How could I have thought that it was he?"

And I completed my journey undisturbed by fears of my husband's proximity.

Arrived at Rye, I, after considerable delay, obtained a vehicle to take me to the Beach House.

I spent the time in trying to map out my plan of action. Should I be dignified and calm, or irate and passionate? Should I overwhelm her with my fury, or awe her with my hauteur?

The carriage stopped before I had come to any decision.

Alighting, I asked the driver to wait.

"Couldn't, ma'am; I could call for you, but I can't wait. I've another order immediately, ma'am, a gentleman that come on the same train with you, and that's waiting for me now."

I ordered him to call for me as soon as possible, and then, after hastily surveying the long, low wooden structure that, in this wintry weather, looked, and evidently was, almost deserted, I ascended to the entrance, where I was greeted by a very short and stout female, who was rubbing her apron between her hands vigorously, as if with the anticipation of brisk business, and a run upon the establishment.

She settled my debate as to how I should broach the subject of my errand, by saying, cheerfully:

"Been expecting you—thought you'd come. Walk right in. Cold day, ma'am, very cold."

Her voice was full and hearty, but she jerked out her words, stopping at every two or three, as if her breath could only do service by spasms. Another peculiarity in her speech was, as I soon noticed, the utter abolition of pronouns.

I followed her into a room, evidently the parlor, that boasted neither of present nor past grandeur.

"Been expecting me?" I asked, in surprise, as I obeyed the wave of her hand, and seated myself.

"Yes. Thought it would be a gentleman—said it might be a lady—perhaps 'twould be both. Pretty ill, ma'am, pretty ill."

"Too ill to be seen?" I asked, quickly.

"Oh, no! Bless your dear soul, no!—not at all! Anxious for you—waiting for you—ain't so ill now—had good care, you see—he-he-he!" and as she laughed, she shook like a huge mould of jelly. "Yes, very good care—is up now—able to go about a little—arm bad, very bad. It was a fall, ma'am—a fall from a buggy."

And she sank into a chair, puffing and panting from her rapid articulation, spread her fat hands out on her lap, and looked benignly upon me.

"Mother?" she gasped, interrogatively.

"Ma'am!" I exclaimed.

"Are—you—mother?"

"Whose mother?" I asked.

She pointed to the floor above.

I concluded that she had reference to the patient, and I replied, indignantly:

"No."

"Aunt?" she then questioned.

"No."

"Sister?"

"No."

"Not grandmother?" she ventured, falteringly.

I arose, looking daggers at her, and thus quelled her inquisitiveness.

"Down," she gasped, as she started to her feet. "I'll go and call—right away—wait here—will come down."

"I'll go up," I said, majestically.

She raised her hands as if with horror, then she waddled out of the room.

There was a cheerful fire crackling in the grate, that appealed to my senses irresistibly, and drawing a chair up before it, I seated myself there.

My back was turned to the door. My cloak concealed my form, and my dark veil covered my hat and fell about my face as I leaned forward and held my hands to the grateful blaze.

I heard someone enter, with slow and measured tread.

"It is she—Inez," I thought. "Now, let me be firm, and calm, and proud."

I drew back from the fire, and was about to start up, when an arm encircled my waist, I was drawn close to a manly form, and I heard a low, passionate voice murmur:

"My darling—my darling, I had not dared to hope for this!"

With a faint shriek I threw back my veil and looked up in blank, bewildered terror; and I saw—oh, how my senses reeled as I saw that I was clasped in the embrace of that stranger!—he whom I had met so many times before!

I did not stop to look at him again; like a flash I started from him, and turned to the door, and there, erect and stern, his face of an ashen hue, there stood my husband!

I recoiled as if a hand had struck me.

Had I seen aright? Was this not some horrible delusion.

I looked back, quickly—despairingly; there stood that stranger, the picture of dismay; I turned to the door—there stood Augustus, the picture of consternation.

I made one effort to reach him, then my reeling senses succumbed, and I sank into oblivion.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A NEW STATE OF AFFAIRS.

I SEEMED to be in a sort of a trance; total darkness surrounded me, I was as if bound hand and foot, and yet I heard distinctly the voices of Augustus and that stranger; I heard so distinctly, that I am able to record their hot, passionate words from memory.

"Let me try to explain, Augustus."

"No! Not a word! What I have seen, and what I have heard, is quite enough for me! I'll heed no more of your duplicity!"

"Duplicity! This from you, Augustus, my old friend!"

"Friend no longer. You are not worthy the title."

"Take care—take care! Even you can say too much. Your anger is simply ridiculous, Augustus. It was all a mistake—"

"It was not! I have been fool enough to believe that before, but now my eyes are open! Mistake! Bah! Mistakes of this kind don't occur quite so often."

"But I assure you—"

"What are your assurances worth? Tell me that! Nothing—absolutely nothing! Know this, Edgar Wells, my honor is as dear to me as to anyone! You have wounded mine through my wife!"

"Your wife! Great Heavens, Ray, can you, for a moment, be so insane as to think that I—that I fancy, or favor, or—or—I vow, I can't think of a suitable word! that I—in short, that your wife came here to meet me?"

"What else can I think?"

"What else? Anything—everything! Nothing could be so ridiculous as that."

"Ridiculous—why?"

"Why? Because, in the first place, she is old enough to be my mother; in the second place, she is—"

"Hush! No ridicule, if you please. Remember, sir, that, whether old or young, she is my wife—"

"I beg your pardon. It is the first time that you have so proudly paraded your possession of her."

"And it shall not be the last. Not till danger threatens do we awaken to a full knowledge of the worth of our treasures. Now, sir, what I have to say to you is this: we are friends no longer. I have sought to serve you, and you reward me in this way—by stealing in, like a thief in the night, and robbing me of—"

"Bah! What nonsense! Ray, I've no patience with you. You know that I love Floy—"

"You don't! That is hypocrisy—all hypocrisy! Thank God, I can warn her before it is too late! Love her? when she has been at death's door, and you have not once inquired for her—when she has not heard from you in weeks? Is this willful silence a proof of your love? Is it love that has caused you to bury yourself in this out-of-the-way place, away from the knowledge of every one but my wife? And then you say she did not come to meet you! Did she guess that you were here? Did she come just to follow out a whim of hers? Perhaps you expect me to believe that, by the merest chance, you accidentally met my wife here, and that, by some strange fortuity, you were surprised into greeting her with something that looked very much like an embrace, and by the utterance of words that sounded very much like a lover's address! Bah! I'm not a fool, Edgar!"

"You are beside yourself, just at present, Augustus. I can't think that you are in earnest, and yet I feel that you are not jesting. You don't know what you are saying, and it is useless to talk with you. I will leave you; when you are calmer I will see you again."

"Don't!—take my advice, and don't attempt to see me, Edgar Wells! I have been a staunch friend, but now I am a bitter enemy! It will be as well if we do not meet again."

I heard no more.

Soon I awakened as from a deep sleep, and those words lingered in my mind like part of a dream.

I started up, and looked anxiously about me.

Augustus and I were alone; he was standing in the center of the room, his eyes fixed upon me with an angry expression, which was new to them—an expression which quite awed me.

"Where is he?" I faltered, the fear of beholding that stranger coming to me.

"Is it well, Martha, to show that your first thought is for him?"

I looked at him in blank amazement. How coldly he spoke! How stern he looked! What had happened? It never occurred to me to connect the words that I had heard in my trance with anything that had actually transpired.

I drew back on the lounge till my head rested against the wall, and met his gaze, timidly.

"Well?" he said, coldly.

I was utterly at a loss for words. A vague idea was present with me, that I had come to this place with the expectation of realizing a grand triumph, and that I had been sadly disappointed; with that exception thought was chaos, my mind was all confusion.

"Martha, why are you here?"

That question suddenly and sternly put, caused me to start and gasp as if a piece of ice had slipped down my back.

Why had I come? That aroused all my dormant energies, and memory reasserted her sway. Why had I come? It had proved to be a fool's errand. How, without making a confession of that, was I to satisfy my husband?

I took refuge in silence. I straightened myself up, composed my lips, and looked defiance at him.

"Martha, why are you here?" he asked again.

"Don't waste your breath, Augustus," I said, coolly.

"But, Martha, I insist upon knowing. You must answer me."

"Well, if you insist, I shall—" He began to smile approvingly, as if commending me for my ready obedience; but I disappointed him, by adding: "I shall insist, also. You ask me why I am here, and insist upon an answer; I ask you why you are here, and I also insist upon an answer."

"I came here because you came."

"And I came because I wanted to. Are you satisfied?"

"No."

He stepped to me, and placing a hand firmly upon my shoulder, said, slowly:

"Martha, you came here to meet that man."

"Great Heavens!" I exclaimed, really startled by his fierce earnestness.

"So you both say. I put a similar question to him, and he starts from me, and cries: 'Great Heavens!' I put it to you, and you start, and cry: 'Great Heavens!' Is that all the satisfaction I can get? Martha, will you explain this?"

"No, Augustus, I will not."

"And why not?"

"For certain reasons."

"What are they?"

"Good ones—that is all I choose to say."

"You will not tell me, then?"

I shrank from the peculiar gleam in his eye, and my heart sank as I faintly replied:

"No, I will not."

"Martha, I will ask you once again. It will be for the last time, so consider before you reply. How did you know that he was here, and why did you come?"

"I didn't know that he was here," I snapped.

"Oh, Martha!"

"It's the truth," I half sobbed, "it was all a mistake."

"His very words!" he cried, bitterly. "All a mistake! I cannot believe it."

"Well," I said, with an expressive shrug of the shoulders, that implied that he could do as he pleased about believing.

He turned from me quickly, and walked to the window, where he stood with his head bowed against a pane.

This was a new phase altogether, and it astonished me. Could I have believed his emotion to be genuine, I might have explained all to him; but, judging from past experience, I felt that it was more likely that it was only a ruse of his, intended to pave the way for some new scheme. I was, therefore, not willing to humiliate myself by telling him of that which I would scarcely acknowledge to myself; that I had suffered another most inglorious defeat.

I endured the silence that had fallen between us, for a few moments; then I spoke up, sharply:

"I thought you were going to Philadelphia, Augustus? Do you remember telling me, about twenty-four hours ago—but perhaps your memory cannot reach into that dim and fabulous antiquity—"

He faced me suddenly, thus interrupting me. His face was pale, his eyes blazing, his hands clenched tightly; his voice was full of passion and pain, as he cried:

"If I have deceived you, you have deceived me! Let not one false one taunt the other! I, at least, am willing to acknowledge my deception! But you—you—bah! Why waste words? We are quits—quits, and strangers henceforth! You can go your way, I will go mine."

"Not a word," as I started up to go to him, really alarmed. "Not a word! You have refused to explain; it is now too late."

Then, lowering his voice, he added, quietly:

"The carriage is waiting. We will go. Come."

Speechless from amazement and fear, I submitted meekly to his imperiousness, and followed him down to the carriage.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ESTRANGED.

ESTRANGED!

That word had as much of bitterness for me as it could have for any one.

Augustus and I were estranged. The same roof sheltered us, yet we were as far apart as if the ocean rolled between.

This new phase of my husband's character—so cold,

so stern—awed me and angered me. It awed me, as it aroused all my love, and filled me with longings to be all in all to him; it angered me, as I felt how unjust was his silent condemnation, and as I feared that it was only a ruse.

So, day after day, I endured his coldness, his silence, his absence, without a murmur, and waited for the end, which now I fully believed would be some extravagant demand upon my purse and my patience; and now I hoped would be some proof that he really and truly loved me.

Oh, has it not been so from the beginning of time? How women, weak mortals that we are, hang on the favor of our lords, be they deserving or not. We kiss the lips that open but to deceive us. We caress the hand that has been raised in cruelty!

It is as the poet says:

"May slighted woman turn
And, as the vine, the oak hath shaken off,
Bend lightly to her tendencies again?
Oh, not by all her loveliness, by all
That makes life poetry and beauty, no!
Make her a slave; steal from her rosy cheek,
By needless jealousies; let the last star
Leave her a watcher by your couch of pain;
Wrong her by petulance, suspicion, all
That makes her cup a bitterness—yet give
One evidence of love, and earth hath not
An emblem of devotedness like hers."

Three weeks of this life had gone by, and there seemed no prospect of a change.

If my faith had kept pace with my love, I should long since have bowed before my husband, and made the humiliating confession of my defeat; but faith lagged far behind.

It was a bright February morning.

I was seated in my dressing-room, alone. I had been reading a note that had just come from Mrs. Pemberton. I had stopped as I heard my husband's footsteps in the room above; and, as I listened, a longing, that in its intensity was a pain, crept into my heart for a return of the days of a month ago.

Yes, happier far were those days of suspicion, and jealousy, and his misrepresentations, than this weary, dreary time of heartache and longing!

"Oh, if he but loved me!" I sighed, and then I arose and walked to the mirror, and calmly, critically surveyed myself.

Three weeks had done much to improve me. I was thinner and paler, which was greatly to my advantage. Surely, it was a pleasing reflection that I saw. My dark hair was combed smoothly back beneath a fanchon of white Swiss and black lace, brightened with a few moss rose buds. A long robe of dark blue swept gracefully about me; delicate lace, and moss rose buds were fastened at my throat.

I turned away satisfied, and re-seating myself, I read the note I had received:

"DEAR MRS. RAY: Didn't I tell you that 'papa' would be telegraphed for? I was no false prophet. He has not only been telegraphed for, but he is, even now, in the city. And the sly Floy has behaved, and still behaves, admirably. She smiles most dutifully upon the tall, sallow specimen of humanity whom her father brought over with him, and who is destined to be her husband. They are to be married in a week, and then they start off on an extended tour. 'Floy has evidently outlived her love for—you know who. She actually blesses me, telling me that I have been the means of saving her from a lifetime of misery—from making the greatest error of her life, and so on.

"But to my purpose: They are all visiting with me, you know—or rather, you don't know. By 'they' I mean Floy's papa, Floy's intended, Floy's friends, and Floy herself. I have been doing my best to entertain them, and now I call upon you to add me a little. We are going to the ball at the Academy, to-morrow night, and I would be so delighted to add yourself and husband to our little party. There will be plenty of room in our box, and your husband is such good company. Now, let me see you there, and oblige
Yours,
ANNETTE PEMBERTON."

I was as much mystified at the second reading as I had been at the first. Surely that anonymous note could not have referred to Augustus, since she now desired to bring him into Floy's presence.

Well, it was useless to conjecture; I could fathom nothing; it was a confusion that I could not make straight. I had proofs, positive they seemed to me, that both Floy and Inez were my rivals, and yet there were so many conflicting circumstances attending them that I felt, as was the truth, that I knew nothing at all.

In the midst of my ruminations, I heard my husband's step on the stairs. A hope—a wish—a longing leaped into my heart.

"Will he come in?" I murmured; "or will he, as usual, pass on and out, without a word to me?"

He halted outside of the door. Had I been a maiden of sixteen waiting for her lover, my heart could not have thumped more furiously. In the moment of suspense that followed I could almost hear its beating.

A fluttering sigh of thankfulness escaped me as the door was opened, and he entered.

I could not look up at him; timidity and fear seemed to chain down my eyelids; the timidity of love, and the fear of showing it and thus exposing myself to his ridicule.

"Martha," he said, quietly.

Surely, there was an intonation of tenderness in his tone. I know that the name had never sounded so sweet to me; never had it vibrated so pleasantly on my ear.

With a great effort, I looked up, and oh! how

my heart went out to him as he stood there so erect and proud, so handsome!

Why—why did doubt intrude? Why did I heed its hateful whispering?

"Show your feelings—betray your tenderness, and give him the opportunity for which he has been waiting. He will condescend to listen to your words of love, but dearly will you have to pay for his magnanimity."

I saw that he was about to speak. I checked him by holding out that note I had received, and saying calmly:

"Read it."

He bit his lips, his face hardened, and bowing slightly, he advanced, and took the note.

As he read, I watched him. No change came to his countenance. At the end he looked up, saying quietly:

"We will go, Martha. We had better go, or Dame Rumor will begin to wag her tongue."

I was amazed. Had I heard aright? Whatever I had expected, it had not been this. I suppose I looked the surprise I felt, for he smiled, as he added:

"Yes, we will go, and together. Be good enough to send Mrs. Pemberton word at once. And Martha, you will please me by wearing your cream-colored silk, and corals. I want you to look your best."

I was completely taken aback. Gratification was the predominant feeling; but it was so tempered with prudence, and the fear that he was only ridiculing me, that I kept silence.

"I will let this be a test," I said to myself. "If he is in earnest now—if this does not prove to be a ruse, adopted to further some purpose of his, I will believe in him, and I will seek to effect a reconciliation."

On this little matter I now staked my future, my fate, my happiness. It seemed as if I had come to the turning-point in my existence, and anxiously, and in great suspense, I waited for the hour that would tell me what was in store for me.

Would it be life-long estrangement, or would it be perfect reconciliation?

CHAPTER XXV.

WILL HE STAND THE TEST?

It was the morning of the eventful day—eventful, because it was to decide my future weal or woe.

I sat at the breakfast-table, with Augustus as my *vis-a-vis*.

My hands trembled as they fluttered among the cups and saucers. I was all eagerness and anxiety, hope and fear. I was eager for the hours to pass so that I would know my fate; I was anxious, as faith in my husband faltered, and I felt quite sure that my fate would be woe. Fear sickened me, as I waited in momentary expectation of hearing words that would prove that all this sternness, tempered with unspoken tenderness, was but hypocrisy; hope thrilled me as the words were not uttered, and there seemed every prospect that he would stand the test with which I had determined to try him.

Oh, if he did not fail me now, I would trust him always! I would believe him fully, and we would be so happy!

My thoughts strayed far away from my surroundings—far away to a realm of bliss, where Augustus and I were treading flower-strewn paths, walking side by side and hand in hand, with not a shadow of suspicion between us.

Yes, even I, so unpoetically named, and with the seal of my thirty-five years stamped on face and form, could indulge in such romantic imaginings!

And they overwhelmed me; between hope that they would be realized and fear that they would not, they overwhelmed me, and unconsciously I buried my face in my hands, with a low, soft sob.

Augustus' voice brought me to myself.

"Martha, what troubles you?"

Strongly was I tempted to tell him the truth—to tell of my hopes and fears; but prudence restrained me, whispering in my heart:

"Wait. Wait till the night is past—wait, and test him to the full—wait."

And I waited.

I met his look of solicitude coldly, as I asked, carelessly:

"Did you speak, Augustus?"

A look of pain flitted over his face, and I almost forgot the whisperings of prudence, till doubt suggested: it may be more of his hypocrisy—don't trust him yet. Then I gave ear to prudence again.

He arose, sighing wearily, as he said:

"Why will you resist every effort I make toward a happier state of affairs, Martha? Is this so pleasant that you desire it to continue?"

"Whatever 'this' is, you must remember, Augustus, it is of your own doing."

"Mine?"

"Yes, yours."

"Why, Martha, what have I said, or done, to cause you to affirm that?"

"Is your memory failing you at your time of life? I, with my additional years, cannot forget what you said."

"Well, what did I say?"

"Don't be absurd," I snapped.

"I don't mean to be absurd, Martha. I am really in earnest, and desirous of bettering matters here; if that is impossible, then I intend to—"

He stopped abruptly there, and clasping his hands behind his back, stood looking sadly into the fire.

My heart thumped furiously as I half-divined what he had been going to say. It was some few moments before I could control myself sufficiently to speak calmly.

"Well, if that is impossible, what then?"

"What then? I intend to go away, Martha."

I had anticipated his words, still they shocked me as if they had fallen unexpectedly on my ears. With a mighty effort I steadied my voice, and asked:

"Where?"

"To Ultima Thule, or to—"

"To Ultima Thule?" I interrupted, laughing mockingly.

He looked at me quickly, keenly, sadly. I looked back scornfully, as I sneered:

"That sounds about as romantic and improbable as if you had said that you were going to Heaven."

He turned toward the fire again, and I arose and walked to the window, to conceal the tears that had welled to my eyes.

What if he should go away? What if he should go that day? Was it safe to wait till night ere I dropped my mask of coldness? Might he not think that reconciliation was impossible, and, in despair, leave me at once?

Oh, no—no, I dared not wait—it was too great a risk—I would speak at once.

I started to him, and in a tone that told of all the longing in my heart, I began:

"Augustus—"

He turned to me like a flash, and just the ghost of a smile flitted over his face.

That was enough; or rather, it was too much. Was it joy or was it triumph? Was I, after all, playing right into his hands by confessing my tenderness? Beware of hypocrisy, prudence whispered, and doubt after doubt came trooping into my mind, till love was altogether excluded.

I said no more, and resumed my mask of coldness.

The light died from his face, and pale and stern he stood, looking wonderingly at me.

"You spoke to me, Martha?" he said, interrogatively.

"Yes, I did; but—"

"But what?"

"I've changed my mind."

"Martha, what were you going to say?" he asked, firmly. "For a moment, your face, your voice, seemed to imply that reconciliation was not impossible. What were you going to say?"

I replied, carelessly:

"I was not thinking of reconciliation, I assure you. I had a far more interesting subject in my mind; I was thinking of my diamond necklace, and was on the point of asking you to stop at Tiffany's and get it for me. The clasp was not quite safe, and I sent it to be fixed, as I may decide to wear diamonds to-night. But I will not trouble you; I will go for it myself."

"As you please, Martha. Get the diamonds, by all means; but will you not gratify me by wearing your corals to-night?"

It was hard to resist the tone in which he spoke, but I did.

I turned coldly aside, saying, disdainfully:

"It is useless to waste much breath about my toilet, Augustus. The chances are ten to one that I do not go."

"Not go, Martha?"

"Yes, not go."

"And why—why this uncertainty?"

For a moment the remembrance of past indignities fired me, and in passionate tones, I cried:

"Why? Why have I not gone before when it has been my firm intention to do so? Have I not the same uncertain, not-to-be-depended-upon escort now as ever? Has not some urgent business, or a dying friend, or a call to Philadelphia, or something of that kind, always cropped up just at the last moment? And may not that which has happened before happen again? Now do you understand why I may not go to-night?"

"I can't blame you for your want of faith, Martha."

"No, I should think not," I interposed, grimly.

"But will you not believe me when I say that it will not happen again?"

"I require stronger and more convincing proof than mere words, Augustus."

"You shall have it! To-night will be a beginning; we will go to-night, and together; nothing can prevent that, unless—"

Of course, we must make allowance for the contingencies of fate—but, unless I fall down stairs and break my neck, or some unruly horse tramples upon me, or some little trifle of that sort transpires, I shall escort you to the Academy to-night."

"And leave me as soon as we get there, I suppose?"

I snapped. "Even then it will not be too late to remember suddenly some forgotten engagement."

"Perish the thought!" he exclaimed, solemnly.

"Have faith, Martha—have a little faith, and believe now what time will prove: that you will never have cause to complain again."

I was very busy just then hunting for my handkerchief under the table, though I knew that it was in my pocket; but I wished to hide my face from Augustus, for I felt that upon it was reflected the joy that his words had brought to my heart.

"It is in your pocket, Martha," he said, laughingly, and I knew that he had fathomed my little ruse.

"Oh, is it?" I faltered, confusedly, straightening myself up so unguardedly that there followed a collision between my head and the table; my head got the worst of it, from all indications.

That deepened my confusion, of course, and I could not even resent Augustus' evident enjoyment of the scene.

The next moment he had me in his arms, and was whispering:

"I guess my Martha does not feel quite so hard toward me as she tries to make me believe. You are not a clever actress, my love, and I know—"

"What?" I interposed, very sharply, though inwardly I was exuberant.

"That you love me."

"Indeed!" and I tossed my head scornfully.
 "Yes. And if you would only believe that I love you, Martha," he added, his voice taking a deep and earnest tone.

"Prove it, and I'll believe."
 "Time—time, Martha. And now, adieu," as he kissed me fondly. "I must go."

He left me then, and I was glad of it, for another moment and I should have forgotten prudence entirely, and acted out the promptings of love.

Even as it was, had I not betrayed my feelings? Were we not reconciled now? Had he not penetrated the mask I had assumed? It was useless to try to answer those queries, so I gave them up, and turned my thoughts to speculations upon the evening's event.

What varied emotions were mine that day! Above all, hope and fear predominated, alternately swaying me; now I was elevated by the former, now depressed by the latter.

And so till afternoon; then, as the hour for the test was nearer, and suspense was harder to endure, I felt that I must escape from myself for a while, so I ordered the carriage, and was driven down to Tiffany's, where I learned that my husband had called for, and received, the diamond necklace.

Feeling perfectly satisfied, I returned home.

The hour preceding dinner was a time of terrible suspense. It seemed to me that the door-bell had never sounded so often, and at each ring I started up and waited in sickening suspense for the appearance of Philander with the half-expected note, or telegram.

But my fears proved to be idle ones. At last, I heard my husband's voice in the hall, and then his approaching footsteps.

My heart beat high with joy. I sprang up, prepared to welcome him gladly; but ere he reached the door, prudence had whispered:

"There is time yet for him to fail you—wait."

And again I concluded to wait.

He entered, and I greeted him calmly. The same demeanor was preserved throughout dinner. I watched him keenly; not a sign of uneasiness was on his face, or in his manner; there were no despairing looks cast at the clock; still, I sat in momentary expectation of hearing some excuse for non-attendance at the Academy. But the meal was over, and nothing had transpired to confirm my fears.

Very—very pleasant were my musings as I arranged my dark hair, and fastened in among its massive braids some pale yellow roses; as I donned the cream-colored silk, and brightened it with necklace and ornaments of blood-red coral. Not once did it occur to me to wear aught else than that which Augustus had desired; not once did I think of my diamonds.

"He will stand the test," I murmured, gladly, as I put the finishing touches to my toilette, and listened to his gay whistling that proceeded from the adjoining room. "He will not fail me to-night?"

Scarcely were the words uttered when his whistling ceased. Why, I knew not, but my heart seemed to stop its beating at the same instant, and I remained in an attitude of expectation.

Silence, dead silence for a few moments, then an exclamation of "Gracious Powers!" came to my ears.

And almost immediately, the door connecting the rooms was opened, and my husband's head appeared.

In a tone of real distress, he spoke:

"Martha, I'm just going around the corner. I'll be back in five minutes."

Instantly, hope died. So, he was about to escape me, after all! My face hardened, I knew; I felt as if I had been suddenly transformed into a grim-visaged nutcracker. I looked disdainfully at him, saying sharply:

"I've been expecting this! Going around the corner, eh? May I ask what it is that calls you around the corner at such a time as this?"

"Don't be unkind, Martha," he pleaded. "I'll be back in five minutes. I'm just going to get a cigar."

"A cigar! Ha-ha! A cigar! Do you think that I am such a fool as to believe that?"

"I—I didn't mean a cigar, Martha. I meant to say that I was going to see a man."

"Bah! That's an ever-ready excuse with your sex. Going to see a man, indeed! I don't believe it!"

"But will you not believe if I return as I promise?"

"I'll see."

"Just five minutes, Martha; or ten at the most."

"Or, it might happen to be a couple of hours," I added, sneeringly.

But he was gone. I heard the street-door close after him, then I turned to the clock, and noted the time.

Oh, what a bitter blow was this! My hopes dashed just when hope was highest!

I felt that he would not return; and when ten minutes had passed, and he was still away, I had the satisfaction of knowing that my conviction had not failed me, and the misery of knowing that my husband had.

I stationed myself before the mirror, looked with scorn upon the image reflected there, and cried:

"Martha Ray, what a fool you have been! To think that I even went so far as to defer to his wishes so strictly!"

And I glared at my light robe, and touched the corals—and as I touched them, they brought to mind my diamond necklace.

Augustus had said nothing about it; it must be in his room. I sprang in, and looked about on bureau, table, desk, chairs; no necklace!

A horrible suspicion shot into my heart; he had not made the expected request for money—was he not capable of using my diamonds for the attainment of that?

I searched my room, the hall, the dining-room. No, it was not to be found. It was gone—and Augustus was gone, perhaps forever; over an hour had passed

since he left the house, and I felt that he would never return.

Imagine my misery! How my gay attire mocked me! Tremblingly, passionately, I doffed it, and wrapping a dark robe about me, I seated myself before the fire to brood over my woe.

Suddenly I remembered Mrs. Pemberton and her party.

"What will they think?" I queried. "It is now eleven o'clock, and they are waiting for us, I suppose."

A sharp peal of the door-bell startled me so that I bounded to my feet as if I had been shot from a gun. The blood flowed sluggishly through my veins, a sense of suffocation oppressed me, as I waited to learn what it meant.

I heard Philander's step on the stairs; nearer—nearer, till at last he was at the door.

I opened it in answer to his knock.

A telegram was in his hand.

I fairly snatched it from him, and closing the door, I tore it open, as I cried:

"Now to see what his excuse is this time! Another dying friend, or perhaps—my God!" I broke off suddenly, as I became aware of that which I had been reading. "What is this?"

And I read again:

"Mrs. Ray:—We do not go to the academy to-night, as Floy is missing.
 A. PEMBERTON."

"She, too!" I gasped. "Is she gone, too? My God, can it be —?"

My voice failed me, and I sank helplessly into a chair, where I remained for hours, thinking of the simultaneous and very significant disappearance of Augustus, Floy, and my diamond necklace.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A TIME OF TRIAL.

The night passed, and morning was at hand.

Augustus was still away. He had not appeared to upset my firm conviction that he would never return.

I was a deserted wife. A deserted wife! Oh, what keen and galling misery was embodied in those words—a deserted wife!

How the world would make merry over my woe! How it would speak of Martha Ray and her young husband, and shaking its wise head sagely, would conclude: it has ended as only it could end. No one would blame him, and all would look upon me with pity; pity, that even now as I anticipated it, made my blood boil, and my heart rebel.

No, it should not be! The world should not pity me; I would face it bravely, and force it to abstain from commiseration.

I locked the door of my husband's room, saying, with all the energy and firmness of a Roman matron:

"Thus I shut him out from my heart and my life, forever—forever!"

But, alas! for woman's weakness! Not an hour had passed when I found myself thinking in this wise: perhaps Floy had returned; perhaps Augustus would soon return; perhaps their simultaneous departure was only a coincidence, and meant nothing at all; perhaps—perhaps. Oh, I could not frame my thoughts into words, for hope had leaped into my heart, and I was not the rational being of a few moments since!

The end of it was that I attired myself with great care, and started for Mott Haven.

For almost the first time, my journey thither was marked with no incident worthy of note.

If I should say that my heart quailed not, as I stood on the stoop of Mrs. Pemberton's stately home, waiting to be admitted, and thinking of the evil things I might hear as soon as admission was granted—I repeat, if I should say that, then I would be departing from the path of veracity which I have been treading unswervingly for five-and-thirty years.

My heart did quail, and I acknowledged it; and for one moment I meditated seriously upon a retreat, but before I could put my design into execution the door was opened, and I, of course, had to enter; and mentally I ranked myself among the legion of fools, for having placed myself in a position which, to say the least, might be decidedly uncomfortable.

An almost solemn hush seemed to have settled upon the house. I felt it oppressively as I was ushered into the darkened drawing-room.

A sound, as of the distant murmuring of the wind among trees, came to my ears, and I knew that Mrs. Pemberton was approaching.

I assumed an expression of countenance, and an attitude, that were meant to be formidable, and prepared myself to meet bravely whatever was in store for me.

"Mrs. Ray, are you here?" Mrs. Pemberton asked, in a subdued tone, as she peered around the darkened room.

"Of course I am, as you would know if you would take the trouble to use your eyes."

The occasion, to me, seemed to require causticity; hence the nature of my reply.

"To be sure, so you are," and she advanced, quickly and noiselessly. "But, hush, hush!" she added. "We're in a delightful state of romance and mystery here, and far be it from me to break the spell! You received my telegram last night?"

"Yes. And I have come—"

"I see that you have," she interposed, evidently desirous of doing all the talking herself. And now—

"But Floy," I interposed, in turn, determined to have my say. "Is she still missing?"

"Oh, yes."

How smilingly she laid the ax at the root of my hopes!

"Oh, yes, she is still missing. And now let me tell you all about it. At dinner she was with us, as charming as usual, all tenderness to her papa, all devotion to her intended; who, by-the-way, rejoices in the name of Cardwell. I must say that he has belied his patronymic, for he hasn't played his card well at all. How is that? good, eh?"

"Very," I replied, listlessly. I was in a poor humor for wit of any kind.

Apparently not noticing my lack of appreciation, she continued:

"We separated to make ready for the Academy. Of course we had no suspicion of treachery, and each, in his or her allotted room, pursued the mysteries of the toilet, contentedly. We were to assemble in the parlor, and depart *en masse*. One after another came down, till all but Floy were there. Still no suspicion of treachery! I went up for her, thinking that she might be in need of a little assistance. Imagine my horror, when upon opening the door, I found the room—empty!"

She paused, as if to give me time to comprehend the full horror of the situation.

I sat like a statue, or a mummy, and made no sign. Nothing daunted, she proceeded:

"Yes, empty! Think of it! And not so much as a white slipper, or a glove to be seen, to prove that she had contemplated going to the ball! I caught sight of a note upon the table; I took it, and with it I flew—"

"Flew?" I interrogated, spitefully.

"Yes, flew. I actually flew down stairs, and gave it to her papa. He read it, and oh! the confusion that followed! She had been deceiving us, the sly puss! had been playing the obedient, till an opportunity came when she could escape from this marriage to a man she hated.

Oh, you should have seen parent and lover! Nothing on the stage ever came up to it for a scene of paternal rage—of a lover's despair! Fifteen minutes of this melodrama, and then they started in pursuit. Of course they had no idea where to go, but they would do what they could. They took one of the carriages that were in waiting for us, and were driven off to the depot, while we remained behind, to endure most terrible suspense."

The last words she rendered effective by uttering them in a stage whisper.

Still I sat, grim as death, and spoke not.

A deep sigh, and then:

"Little did we think how it would end. Scarcely twenty minutes had elapsed when a ring at the door-bell filled the house with echoes, and brought us all to our feet—yes, to our feet!"

Did she suppose that I would think that they had been brought to their heads, that she made such emphatic repetition? I was about to question her indignantly, but she interrupted me, saying, as she mopped her eyes with her handkerchief:

"Oh, shall I ever forget the sight we then beheld? Mr. Haverhill, a bruised and battered wreck, brought in the arms of two men; one was Mr. Cardwell, the other was a stranger to me. Oh, for the eloquence of a Cicero, that I might worthily depict the scene that ensued! Mr. Haverhill was deposited on a sofa, and then, battered and bleeding as he was, he spurned Mr. Cardwell with his foot, as he cried:

"Go, you coward! you poltroon! you wretch! Go, and never let me see you again!"

"Then, turning to the stranger, he extended his hand, saying:

"Bless you, sir, you have saved my life at the risk of your own! Would that in some way I could prove to you my gratitude!"

"Is that wretch, that miscreant gone?" he asked, fiercely.

"Yes," we all chorused, for he had sneaked out, like a whipped dog, at the first words from the irate old gentleman.

"Then, turning again to the stranger, he began:—"

"You have the—" He stopped there, stared, gasped, coughed, sputtered, and at last cried, hoarsely:

"Edgar Wells! You here?"

"The stranger bowed.

"The old gentleman looked at him as if he were about to spring upon him, and tear him limb from limb; but the next moment a smile relaxed his features, and he said, heartily:

"Bless you, my boy! bless you! I have vowed that you should never marry my daughter; but you have saved my life, and proved yourself so noble, that now I say: take her—take her—if you can find her."

"Do you see, Mrs. Ray? Do you understand? It was Floy's lover, from whose arms she had been torn ruthlessly. He, it seems, had appeared just in time to save Mr. Haverhill from a horrible death. The carriage, in which they had started in pursuit of Floy, had broken down just as they were crossing the railroad track. The horses dashed on, the driver was thrown some distance off, Cardwell escaped uninjured, and Mr. Haverhill lay half-buried in the wreck. What did Cardwell do? Help his prospective father-in-law? No—he ran! Yes, he ran, even though a train was fast approaching! Nearer and nearer it came, and death seemed inevitable, when, almost at the last moment, a man came dashing forward, and dragged him from the track! It was a daring deed, but it was crowned with success."

"He, that is, Edgar Wells, then collared the coward, Cardwell, and forced him to lend a helping hand. They conveyed Mr. Haverhill to a carriage in which he, that is Edgar Wells, again, had fortunately been coming along. So, now, he can have Floy, if only he can find her. He has gone in search of her—"

"Have you any idea where—where she—" I stammered.

"I think I have," she replied, looking at me so meaningfully that I actually became faint. "You have come to tell us where she has gone."

"Oh, no," I gasped. "I do not—I have not—at least, I can not—"

"Oh, I thought you could. I felt quite sure that your husband—"

"My husband!" I gasped.

"Yes, your husband. I felt quite sure that he, as he has always been her champion, had now aided her to escape from her misery—or in other words, her marriage."

"Oh, no," I faltered. "It is not so. What is she to him—"

"My dear Mrs. Ray, are you so blind that you have not seen—"

"No, I have not seen," I interrupted, tartly. "It is false—all false! you are altogether wrong in your surmises—altogether!"

She shook her head doubtfully as she said: "I think not. I shall do myself the honor of calling upon your husband to-day, in behalf of my distressed friends here."

"He—he is out of town," I stammered.

"I thought so!" she exclaimed, triumphantly; "I thought so. That proves my theory true. He must be found," she cried, excitedly, rising from her chair and pacing to and fro, "for I am sure he can tell us of Floy. Ah, if she but knew what happiness awaits her here! Poor, deluded creature, if she but knew!"

It was all I could do to keep my senses from failing me as I listened to her words. She was in such a state of excitement that she took no note of my agitation, fortunately.

"When did your husband leave town?" she asked, so abruptly that she actually startled me into replying:

"Last—last evening."

She clapped her hands together gleefully.

"Still further proof?" she cried. "I knew it—I knew that he—"

"Madame," I interrupted, rising in all dignity, but my legs trembled so beneath me that I was glad to resseat myself immediately. "Madame," I repeated, "how can you, to my very face, talk in this way of my husband?"

"Why, do you mind it?" she asked, in surprise.

"Mind it!" I cried. "Good gracious! You, a woman, with all a woman's feelings—can you ask me that?"

"I didn't suppose you would care, Mrs. Ray. Floy is so lovely that she unconsciously appeals to all that is chivalrous in man. Who could refuse to aid beauty in distress? Not Augustus Ray, that I know. And then, too, they are such old friends. Did you not know it? Why, their friendship dates back to a time prior—"

"To the flood?" I sneered.

"Oh, no—dear not at all! To a time prior to his marriage to you. I don't blame him, and I'm sure you can't—"

"Woman, are you mad?" I cried.

"No. Are you?" she asked, coldly.

"Mrs. Pemberton, you horrify me!" I shrieked, exasperated beyond all endurance. "Yes, you horrify me! Why, I—you—he—she—they—all the world—"

I'm sure Mrs. Pemberton did not understand the drift of my words; I am equally sure that I did not understand it myself.

I have a vague remembrance of trying to explain, till my voice was drowned in the confused clatter that arose around me. I felt that cold water was dashed into my face; I recognized the smell of vinegar, camphor, hartshorn; then came a time of peace, and then I awoke and found myself upon a bed in a darkened room.

I arose with an indignant sense of having been imposed upon in some way. It did not take me long to remember all that had transpired, and quickly, passionately, I donned my street gear, and stamped down the staircase, determined to rest not a moment till I was out of the house of this woman who seemed to think my husband's desertion of me for Floy was nothing at all. It never occurred to me that her words could have other meaning than that.

I passed down the hall till I came to the drawing-room, the door of which was open. I glanced in, and I came to a sudden halt as my eyes rested upon the tableau there. Floy, standing beneath the chandelier, clasped in the arms of that stranger, Edgar Wells; while near them, propped up with pillows in a huge arm-chair, sat the stern parent, looking smilingly on.

Then I had wronged my husband! Oh, how hope thrilled my heart as I looked upon Floy, there, in the arms of her lover, and realized that I had wronged my husband.

I wonder that I did not shout aloud in my joy; I could not refrain from one triumphant flourish of my arm, and then I started for the door.

Oh, how I wished for wings, that I could fly to my home, where I fondly believed Augustus would be. Not for a moment did I doubt it. That hope sustained me through the tedious journey home—through the hour that seemed an age.

When I, at last, was at my door, I could have wept for joy. Oh, only to see my husband now would be bliss, ecstasy!

As soon as the door was opened I sprang in, and demanded of Philander:

"Where is Mr. Ray—at dinner?"

He stared at me helplessly.

I was fairly dancing with impatience.

"Is he at dinner?" I cried. "Can't you speak?"

"Oh, yes'm," he replied. "Certainly, ma'am. But—but I don't think Mr. Ray is at dinner, ma'am, for, you see, he—he hasn't come yet."

That blow, so unexpected, seemed to turn me to stone. In an icy tone, I asked:

"Has any word, any message, been sent?"

"No m—nothing at all, ma'am."

"Thank you." And I turned away to try to realize my woe, made deeper, blacker, by the gleam of light that had obscured it for a time.

What did his absence mean?

Like an answer to my query, the name "Inez" flashed into my mind.

I had been on the wrong track. I was a deserted wife all the same, but my rival was not Floy, but Inez.

CHAPTER XXVII

ALL SEEMS LOST.

My experience of the past few months proved to me that I was too apt to jump to conclusions—that I was very—very fallible in my judgments. As, for instance, Floy; how firm had been my conviction that she was a rival of mine! I knew now that she had not been; and my husband's attentions to her seemed to be perfectly *au fait*, as they had seemed to Mrs. Pemberton, whose words I could now understand.

"Why did he not confide in me?" I asked myself. "How much misery I would have been spared, if he had done so."

My own heart gave the answer: because he knew that I would not view the matter in a reasonable light.

I had been entirely in the wrong so far as Floy was concerned; might it not be the same now in regard to Inez?

That blessed doubt lightened my weight of woe in a great measure, and filled my heart with hope.

At any moment he might return; at any moment I might hear his voice, his footfall down in the hall.

I left my door ajar so that I could catch the first indication of his coming, and then I waited. Oh, Heaven, what misery such waiting is, where hope and dread strive desperately for ascendancy!

Hour after hour passed, the evening was gone, night was at hand, and still he had not come. Yet I waited, and hoped, but in vain. And at midnight I stood upon the dead and blackened hearth, that seemed typical of my own life; every spark of fire in the grate was extinguished, as was the flame of hope within my heart; cold and cheerless were my surroundings, cold and cheerless my future loomed up before me.

I was deserted, and alone!

But by morning I was myself again; no longer a sorrowing, suffering woman, but one whose spirit revolted against the indignity that had been put upon her. I was filled with suspicion and jealousy, all of which had Inez for its object, who, I again felt convinced, was my rival.

To prove my suspicion true was now my purpose.

But how to do it?—that was the question.

After much thinking, I decided upon the following: to go to Mott Haven, and try to find the abode of that steeple-like female upon whose corns I had once intruded. I concluded that she knew Inez, as it was she whom I had seen in the sleigh with Inez on that day when we had gone to skate on the river; and I concluded that she lived in or about Mott Haven, as she had alighted from the train at that place.

It was not a very definite trail, but it was better to follow it than to remain at home and suffer the tortures of passive endurance.

I donned the darkest, plainest apparel my wardrobe contained, and started out.

At Mott Haven I came to a stand-still. How was I to learn where the tall female lived?

I saw a stout, fat-faced, good-natured looking man lounging about on the platform, and I mustered up courage enough to approach and accost him.

His face brightened up after I had said a few words in description of the female whom I desired to find.

"La, now, that's her to a dot," he drawled; "just her and no mistake. You mean the Widow Smith, of course. It's quite a common name, as you likely know, but she ain't no common person; she's a very uncommon person, as the late dead and gone Smith could prove if he was allowed to come back and certify, which might be a charity, as it would save—"

"She is a widow, then," I interrupted.

"La, now, that's just what she is. A widow, and no mistake. She talked Smith to death; yes'm, she talked him to death, poor soul. Morning, noon, and night, her tongue was a-going like a mill-clapper, and he just got disgusted, and laid down and died."

"Does she live hereabouts?" I asked.

"Yes'm. She lives neighbor to us, and so long as it's right in my way I can see you there just as well as not."

I accepted his magnificent offer, and together we walked from the platform.

It was in vain that he attempted to betray me into a disclosure of the object of my visit; I parried all his questions successfully, much to his dissatisfaction, and when we parted at the widow's gate, he looked as sad and disappointed as it was possible for any one to look.

The door was opened, in answer to my ring, by the steeple herself.

She looked down upon me inquiringly. I looked up at her, thinking that it might have been wise if I had brought a ladder with me, so that I could ascend to the level of her auricular organs, and thus spare my voice.

I surveyed her quickly from head to feet. The latter, large and flat, were plainly visible beneath her rather short skirt; the former was adorned with the bow with ends, which, as before, waved lazily in the breeze, said bow being placed precisely on the top of her head, on a small coil of hair that reminded me of a door-knob.

I broke the silence by saying, interrogatively:

"This is Mrs. Smith?"

"I reckon so," was the curt reply.

"I have come from the city to see you, Mrs. Smith."

"Then walk right in, madame," and with an angular flourish of her arm she waved me toward a room on the left of the hall.

I entered, seated myself, and maintained silence while she stirred the fire on the hearth, assailed an unoffending and somnolent cat with the poker, and went to the glass between the windows, evidently to see if the door-knob with the bow on it was all right.

Then she came and seated herself opposite to me, and by that time I had decided upon a reason for my coming; but first I wished to hear something of Inez.

How was I to broach the subject? Ah! I spied her picture on the mantel, and it promised to help me in my dilemma.

I looked at it, and then at the Widow Smith, then back again at it, and then the widow spoke as I had expected.

"She's a sort of a cousin of mine."

"Ah!" I said, gently. "She is very beautiful."

"Yes, tolerable looking."

"She lives here with you, I suppose?"

"No. She's been a staying with me, but she's gone now."

My heart began to thump.

"Gone!" I ejaculated, quite forgetting where I was.

"Yes. She went t'other evening—Tuesday evening."

Tuesday! the very evening of Augustus' departure. Ah, I was on the right track now!

"You must miss her sadly," I said, with a view of arousing her loquaciousness.

"Well, I do and I don't. You see she's queer, and it comes from nothing more nor less than being in love. She's been in love ever since she began to walk, I do believe, and she ain't got over it yet. But this last must be an uncommon case, for she ain't never acted as she has now. Gracious goodness!" and she stopped and poked the fire vigorously. "If it don't beat all the way she's been taking on lately—crying, and moping, and fretting, and rigging herself up in the outlandish way, and going around the place, goodness knows where! I ain't got no control over her, and I don't pretend to have; but when she comes to me the other day, and says, 'Auntie, she always calls me auntie, 'I'm going,' 'My child!' says I. 'Yes,' says she, 'I'm going.' 'Where?' says I. And she says, says she: 'I won't tell you; if I do, you'll tell Mr. Filkins.' He's an uncommon fine young man, that Filkins. He's been dreadfully sweet on Inez, but she don't seem to take no sort of notion to him. Why, he came here just after she left t'other evening, and he took on most awful when he heard that she was gone."

"And you could not tell him where, of course?"

"In course not."

"Has she no relatives?"

"None to speak of. She's got an aunt in New York, but she's sick, and old, and stingy, and has a young dandy of a husband, and is skeered to have any one around that ain't older'n herself. Inez was agoing there this Christmas; she asked her aunt to meet her, but the aunt didn't do it, so she got spunky and wouldn't go near her. And so she came here, and—Sh!—Scat!—you little imp!" she ejaculated suddenly, as she threatened the cat, which had crept back to the hearth, with the poker.

That digression favored me, for it gave me time to recover my equanimity, that had been entirely overthrown by her words. Old, and rich, and stingy, with a young dandy of a husband! Pleasant, that, truly.

Still armed with the poker, she looked up at me, and added:

"Well, I was going to tell what I did when she said she was a-going. I just sot my foot down, and I says, says I: 'You can't go.' 'Very well,' says she, so humble-like that she deceived me. I suspected nothing, so I took my nap in the evening as I always do. When I went to sleep she was a-sitting by me; when I woke up she was gone. I hunted for her, but she was gone, bag and baggage! She had written a few words for me; it was something about Filkins. She had promised to marry him, it seems, but she loved somebody else, and couldn't keep her promise."

"That somebody else is my husband, of course," was my mental observation.

"So, you have no idea where she has gone?" I asked, aloud.

"Not the shadow of one! My soul!" and she began again to poke the fire vigorously. "It sets my teeth on edge to think of it! If she didn't want Filkins, why didn't she tell him so, and not run away as if she was skeered of him? She's a disgrace to her sex—she is! Do you suppose that I would have run away from my Smith if I didn't want him, even after I'd promised to marry him? Do you suppose I would? No, not a bit of it! But girls, now-a-days, ain't what they used to be; in my time—"

I arose abruptly, not because I feared to share the fate of the departed Smith, but because I was in despair at the hopeless termination of my search.

I said that I was going, but she, apparently not hearing me, kept right on in her talk about girls in her time. She soon became enthusiastic, flourishing the poker in her right hand in dangerous proximity to my head. My attempts to interrupt her were fruitless; she was entirely lost in her own eloquence.

I became impatient, at length, and left the room.

Her voice, sharp and high, sounded in my ears till the street-door was closed between us; and, for all I know, she may have continued her harangue for hours, unconscious that her auditor had taken unceremonious leave.

Disconsolately I made my way to the depot, and boarded the train for New York. I sank into a gloomy reverie, remaining oblivious to all about me, till the ride was accomplished.

I was sitting, waiting wearily for the crowd to pass out, when happening to lift my eyes, I saw Inez!

Yes, it was she! She was standing right in the light from one of the lamps, and I could see her face distinctly. But she was alone! I peered eagerly forward, but Augustus was not there. Perhaps—Oh, how the hope gladdened me!—perhaps I had wronged him again.

I started up quickly, and tried to force my way along, but in vain; I had to be content with following in the wake of the other passengers. Of course, Inez left the car before I did. As soon as my feet touched the platform I hurried on, straining my eyes to find her.

At length I spied her, far ahead of me.

"There she is!" I cried, gladly, but the next moment I recoiled as from a blow, for I saw that she was accompanied by a man—by Augustus, of course. In the dim, uncertain light that prevailed, I could not see clearly at the distance at which they were, but I knew, only too well, that it was Augustus.

They were walking on with all speed. I soon recovered from my stupefaction, and walked on with all speed also.

As I reached the street, panting and puffing like a porpoise, I saw Inez entering a carriage; her cavalier followed, the driver mounted to the box, the horses started on, and all before I could get breath enough to say a word.

For a moment I was paralyzed with dismay; then I forced myself to action. I sprang down to one of the cabmen on hand there, and gasped:

"Do you see that carriage rolling down the avenue?"

He looked, and saw.

"Follow it—keep it in sight," I panted, "and any price shall be yours!"

He signified his willingness by assisting me into the cab, and soon we were rattling over the stony street.

Once, twice, thrice I looked out of the window to satisfy myself that the driver was doing his duty. Yes, each time I saw a vehicle ahead, dashing along with all speed.

I comprehended, at length, that it was bound for one of the ferries to the Jersey shore, and then the chase became exciting. We were gaining but little, and if we did not succeed in catching the boat that it did, then all was lost.

Nearer—nearer! I kept my head out of the window, breathlessly watching for the end. I saw the lights gleaming, and I heard the bell ringing. I saw the carriage ahead dash in through the ferry gates, and I called out to the driver:

"Quick! Don't spare your horses. We must not miss the boat."

He urged the animals on, but to no purpose; the bell ceased to ring, the gates were closed, and we were left behind.

"It's the train boat," the driver explained. "The last boat for the evening express to the west, or they might have waited for us."

It was with difficulty that I repressed a groan. Of what avail would it be to follow in another boat? I realized that it would be more than useless, so I gave up the pursuit right there.

I was too disconsolate to demur at the exorbitant price the driver demanded; I paid him without flinching, and rode home in a Broadway car.

Once again I stood at my door, waiting to be admitted. No hope was in my heart now to make me eager; I was utterly wretched, utterly miserable, and I fairly dragged myself over the threshold, and passed on, without bestowing a glance upon Philander.

"Deserted, and alone!" was the wail that arose to my lips as I went toward the drawing room.

I saw that there was a light there, but I was so engrossed with thoughts of Augustus and Inez that I did not heed it.

I paused in the doorway, shading my eyes with one hand. I saw a figure before me, but it seemed as part of my thoughts. Then I heard a voice; that aroused me. I looked up, and I saw a woman. I advanced a step, and looked again.

Great Heavens! It was Inez! Inez, whom I believed was speeding on toward the west! Had the age of miracles returned?

I asked abruptly:

"Did you not leave the train at Forty-second street about six o'clock this evening?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"And then I came right here."

"In a carriage?"

"Yes, in a carriage."

"But the gentleman—there was a gentleman with you?"

"Yes, and he is with me now. Mr. Filkins," she called.

Mr. Filkins approached.

I could not speak; I sank into a chair, and stared helplessly at the couple before me.

"I took the liberty of coming here," I heard Inez say, "because you are my aunt; and I took the liberty of asking Mr. Filkins here, because—well, because I am his promised wife."

I heard her, but I did not reply.

I knew now that I had wronged my husband again, but there was only misery in the knowledge, for it made his absence seem the more unaccountable.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONFUSION CEASES.

WE—that is, Inez and I—were at the house of Floy's friends on the avenue.

A soiree, given in honor of Floy's approaching nup-

tials, was the occasion. We were indebted to Mrs. Pemberton for our invitations.

Inez had been eager to go, and I had consented to chaperon her; not only to please her, however, but also to spare myself from the garrulous tongue of Dame Rumor, by facing the world boldly.

I had donned the very costume that Augustus had selected for the ball at the Academy; cream-colored silk and corals—pale-yellow roses in my dark-brown hair. My mirror told me that I had never appeared to such advantage.

Inez was radiant in her dusky beauty. Her dress was of cardinal silk, ornamented with ruffles and puffs of white gauze, which were thickly studded with rich, red berries and autumn leaves, and berries and leaves gleamed against her dead-black hair.

With Mr. Filkins for escort, we had entered Mrs. Wade's (who, by the way, was an entire stranger to me,) brilliantly-lighted and well-filled parlors.

I was quite contented to be a wall-flower. I had made a great sacrifice of my inclinations when I had decided to be present. I felt that I had scourged myself enough by coming without my husband, with no knowledge of his whereabouts, and with only the flimsy fabrication to offer as an excuse for his non-appearance, that he was out of town.

I had no desire to be brought into prominence, and run the risk of an encounter with Floy's lover, my *bête noir*; as it was, I sat in momentary dread of being singled out by him, and put to deepest confusion.

From my corner I had been watching Inez and Edgar Wells; and her pallor, her excessive hauteur, and her agitation when he left her, helped me to divine her secret. Edgar Wells was the somebody else whom she loved; and it was because of his presence there that she had been so eager to go.

Our hostess, Mrs. Wade, saw fit to come and try to woo me from my corner, but I was firm. I pleaded weariness, and begged to be allowed to remain where I was.

She turned from me, and I heard her voice in greeting to some one who had evidently just approached her; then she turned to me again, saying:

"Mrs. Ray, allow me to present to you—"

I had looked up, and to my amazement I saw before me—my husband!

I started to my feet with a low cry, half joy, half astonishment.

Augustus held out one hand; eagerly I placed mine in it.

Mrs. Wade had stopped short in the ceremony of introduction, and was looking from one to the other of us in surprise.

Augustus explained, saying lightly:

"We have met before, Mrs. Wade. In fact, we know each other well. This is my wife."

"Your wife!" she exclaimed. "And your husband!" she added, addressing me.

"That is a natural consequence," interposed Augustus. "Since she is my wife, it is only natural to suppose—to infer—to understand, in fact, that I am her husband."

"Now you are satirical, Mr. Ray; Mrs. Ray said that her husband was out of town—"

"And so I have been. I returned quite unexpectedly, and learning that my wife was here, I concluded to come also."

Mentally I blessed him for his ready wit, that released me from what might have been a very embarrassing situation.

After a little, Mrs. Wade left us, and Augustus and I were alone together.

No longer lost, but found! Was I content? No.

Already I had commenced to torment myself with doubts of him. Instead of saying one word of welcome, I drew myself up and stood like a statue of injured dignity, as I half-sneered:

"Well, Augustus, what have you to say for yourself this time?"

He sighed deeply as he replied:

"It is like the old story of the boy who cried 'wolf!' when there was no wolf; when, at last, a wolf did come, no one answered his cry, as no one could believe him. It is so with me now. I have deceived you so often, that now you will not credit what I have to tell."

"Let me hear your yarn," I said, spitefully. "Your excuses generally have the merit of novelty and ingenuousness, if they do lack the element of truthfulness. They can amuse, if they cannot satisfy me."

He led me to the conservatory ere he spoke again.

"Here we can talk without making of ourselves marks for the curious. Martha, look at me."

"I am looking, sir."

"Am I not pale? Does not my face bear signs of suffering?"

"Suffering! Ha-ha! You are trying a new role, I see."

"Don't be bitter, Martha. Do have a little charity. Do have a little faith in something else than your own opinions. When I left you—let me see, when was it?"

"When was it?" I asked, indignantly. "You may well ask that, sir! It is almost a week since you left me to be gone for ten minutes. Perhaps you reckon time by a calendar of your own—"

"When I left you, Martha, I fully expected and intended to return as I promised; and I should have done so, if—"

"Yes, of course, if," I sneered. "It's all the fault of that 'if,' to be sure."

"If I should tell you, Martha, that I have been ill—very ill, during all this time, what would you say?"

"That I don't believe you!—that it is only a new variation of the old theme! Your nurse has been at the point of death, so has your bosom friend, and now it is yourself."

"You will spare me from your taunts and sneers, Martha, or I will refuse to speak."

Something in his voice warned me to be careful.

As I remained silent, he went on:

"I called at Tiffany's for your diamond necklace, as you have, no doubt, heard by this time. I was then unexpectedly called back to my office—"

"To that dirty, dusty, dingy sanctum of yours?"

I could not repress that sneer.

He looked at me questioningly.

"I have been there," I explained. "It is very dirty, very dusty, very dingy, upon my word! Why, it's a gem!—a perfect bower of luxury and elegance!"

"I'm glad you like it," he returned, quietly. "But to proceed: I left the office for home, and not till my toilet was almost completed did I give a thought to the necklace. I had left it at the office. Of course I would not allow it to be there during the night. I very foolishly hesitated about telling you of my negligence, so I left you as I did. My last remembrance was of running wildly after a horse car. My next realization was to find myself in a hospital ward. I had been kicked by a horse. I was in evening dress, you will remember, so there were no papers, no cards about me to indicate my identity; I was, therefore, taken to the hospital, and there I have been till to-day."

"Why did you not send for me?"

"For two reasons; first, I wished to avoid publicity; second, I felt that you would consider any word I might send a fabrication, so I determined to wait and plead my own cause. Martha, do you believe me now?"

"No!"

He looked keenly at me for a moment, then bowing proudly, he started on, and was gone from my sight ere I could recall my emphatic "no."

For I would have recalled it. I did believe him; I was loth to acknowledge it to him, but I did believe what he told me.

Why had I been so perverse? He was anxious to make peace, why did I strive to perpetuate dissension? It was a conundrum, and I gave it up.

Wearily of the glitter and the glare about me, I sought the solitude of the dressing room, and there I remained for hours in communion with myself—with my unhappy self. The result of it was that I acknowledged that my misery was self-inflicted, and determined to reform, to try to be charitable, to have a little faith.

When I returned to the parlors I looked eagerly about for my husband; he was not there.

I sought the conservatory; he was there, and by his side was Inez.

My resolution to reform, to have faith, could not have taken root, for, at sight of those two together, jealousy and suspicion filled my heart.

Stealthily, I drew near to them. Just then it would have been as keen satisfaction to me to gain proof that all my suspicions had not been groundless, as it would be to gain proof that my husband was true.

I took my stand behind a large-leaved plant in close proximity to them, and then I gave ear to their words.

"When?" Inez asked.

"At once."

"Where?"

"Anywhere—anywhere, out of the world." Reduce that quotation to something possible, and it will stand; as far as I can get with the contents of my very slender exchequer."

"You are determined?"

"I am determined."

"Even though you love her?"

"Even though I love her. Love, alas! has come too late. You will tell her of my departure to-morrow, Inez. When I leave this house to-night, I shall start at once upon my journey. I have a very pleasing image to carry with me; Martha has improved wonderfully of late. This evening, for the first time since our marriage, I felt proud of her, and was glad to say: this is my wife."

"And I'm sure she reciprocated the sentiment, and was glad to say: this is my husband. Only she will not confess it."

"Inez, I have pleaded enough. I am not willing to sacrifice all my dignity, even for love. I am not willing to go to her and say: Please, Martha, forgive me, and I'll be a good boy all the rest of my life. I have confessed my shortcomings, and that is enough; I will not beg, and cringe, and supplicate."

"Nor would I wish you to," I said, as I stepped to his side. "Augustus, forgive me. You are not so much accountable for your faults, as I am for magnifying them. I have been unreasonable and uncharitable; I have not invited confidence, I have repelled it. I acknowledge all this, Augustus, and promise better things for the future."

He took my hands in his, and asked, earnestly:

"Martha, are we reconciled?"

With equal earnestness, I replied:

"Augustus, we are."

"The saints be praised!" he exclaimed, fervently.

Then, in his gay and merry way, he added:

"Your gain, Martha, is the world's loss. I had determined to devote myself to my country, for my country's good—to become a public functionary of some kind, say, for instance, a car-conductor. Think, Martha—oh, think what a car-conductor I would have made! But I bow to the decree of fate; I relinquish my high aspiration to be a Knight of the Bell-punch, and subside into my original character of—your young husband."

I will not say that life has been ecstasy ever since—that Augustus and I never have occasion to disagree; but I will say that we are happy, and that I have never had serious cause to regret my resolution to have faith in—my young husband.

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